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Choice



THX Titans!

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- SHERLOCK HOLMES 2
- THE MUPPETS
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Masters of sound

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Superior cinema

We check out an awesome loft conversion



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The new Smart Viera delivers all the breathtaking picture quality and 3D performance you'd expect from a Panasonic television, while allowing you to access the internet, watch catch-up TV and connect with people all over the world. But what really sets it aside is the power to share your pictures, videos and internet content on the big screen. Just download the Viera Remote app* and swipe straight from your smartphone or tablet.

It's so much more than a television, it's Smart Viera from Panasonic. Official television of the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Find out how the Smart Viera is more than just a television at:
www.panasonic.co.uk/smartviera

SMARTVIERA



*The Viera Remote app is available to download for compatible devices from the Android Market and Apple App Store.

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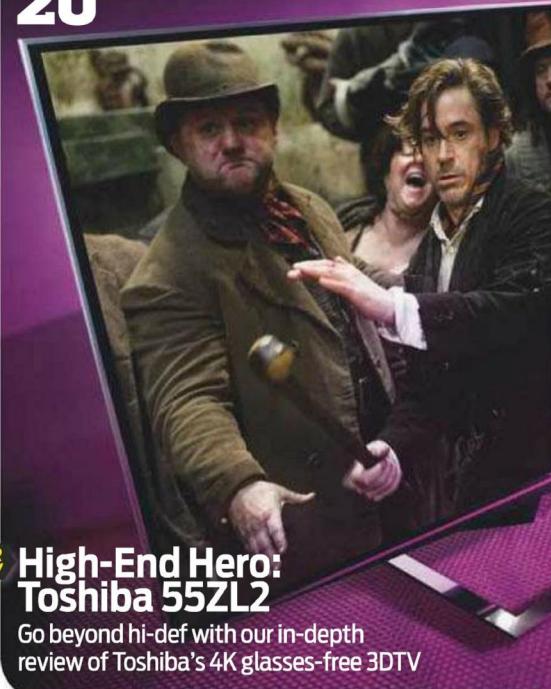
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CO-STARING

Our team of expert writers are the best-qualified in the business

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Technical expert Martin is renowned throughout the home cinema industry



Richard Stevenson:
Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal ERT



Steve May:
HCC's former Editor-in-Chief is one of the UK's most respected AV journos



John Archer:
The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



Danny Phillips:
Former editor of *What Video & High-Definition TV* and dedicated AV boffin



Adrian Justins:
Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*



Ultimate Sci-Fi Movie Marathon

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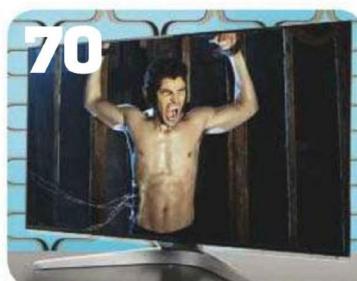




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BULLETIN

→**News highlights** WILSON AUDIO Is the Alexandria XLF the world's best loudspeaker? E.T: THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL Sci-fi star returns in HD DENON New AVR and player announced PHILIPS Forget OLED – we've got Moth Eye! NEWS X10 The hottest news stories in bite-size chunks WRATH OF THE TITANS Fantasy sequel arrives on Blu-ray AND MUCH MORE!

Future screen

LG 55EM960V → www.lg.com/uk



LG may often be associated with the affordable end of the TV market, but with its forthcoming 55in OLED screen it's definitely aiming high. Available in the fourth quarter of this year, but with pre-orders accepted from July, the 55EM960V sports an £8,000 price tag and some of the most cutting-edge display technology available. See page 10 for more.

HCC Online...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag





Swank sound

Wilson Audio Alexandria XLF → www.absolutesounds.com

There's a lot a home cinema enthusiast could do with £200,000, such as blow it on a spectacular pro-install. Or you could just spend the lot on a pair of Wilson Audio's new flagship speakers. Packed with oodles of tech, including a unique Cross Load Firing port system, S-material midrange baffles and 'Convergent Synergy' silk dome tweeters, these sonic titans have been designed for the ultra-high-end hi-fi market. However, we've been reliably informed that Wilson Audio would be able to spec a 5.1 system incorporating a pair should you feel so inclined.

Public transport



Denon is revitalising its unique

Blu-ray Transport concept this Summer with the new DBT-1713UD. Designed to be the perfect partner for the company's new AV-Art range of next-gen AVRs (see p11), this universal disc-spinner is primarily concerned with delivering an unaltered digital signal via HDMI and boasts a fully shielded mechanism, independent block construction (to aid faithful playback of audio and digital signals), YouTube Leanback streaming and Netflix video on demand. The DBT-1713UD is available now, priced around £450. www.denon.co.uk

Slim-line sonics



Building on the success of last year's lineup, Marantz has released two new additions to its range of slim-line AV receivers. The five-channel NR1403 retails for around £350 and promises a 5 x 50W power output (into 8Ω), separate on-board decoders for standard and hi-def audio formats and six HDMI inputs. Meanwhile, the £550 seven-channel NR1603 (pictured) adds a variety of network features for audio and photo streaming, internet radio and AirPlay from your iPad/iPhone/iPod, plus M-DAX2 circuitry to get the best out of compressed audio. www.marantz.co.uk

Stylish surrounds



High-end specialist Bang & Olufsen has expanded its BeoLab 12 family of on-wall speakers with the launch of the BeoLab 12-2 rears. Similar to the slightly larger BeoLab 12-3 models released earlier this year, the sinuous new models feature ICE power amplification, Acoustic Lens Technology and a CosCone woofer to ensure crisp bass reproduction. 'Design and sound fans can now create a high-performance surround setup that is an integrated whole, both aesthetically and acoustically,' reckons B&O product manager Michael Jensen. www.bang-olufsen.com

Playlist...

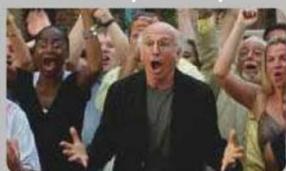
Team HCC reveals its Playback picks of the last month

The Three Musketeers 3D (Region B BD)

It's not the smartest film around, but this surprisingly fun remake is a stunning showcase for 3D and is accompanied by some bombastic sonics



Curb Your Enthusiasm: Season 8 (R2 DVD)



Larry hits New York for yet more hilarious (mis)adventures in this fantastic two-disc set

The Descendants (Region A/B BD)



A beautifully sun-drenched 1080p encode brings the best out of this bittersweet comic drama

Doctor Who: Death to the Daleks (R2 DVD)



It's been a long time coming, but the last remaining complete Dalek story is finally on DVD!

Men in Black (All-region BD)



The recent 3D three-quel [is that a word? Ed] had us digging out the original Will Smith sci-fi comedy on Blu-ray. And it's still a lot of fun!

Philips lauds new Moth Eye

Company says consumers don't need to wait for OLED

While the eyes of the AV world are fixed on OLED technology, Philips believes its own Moth Eye screen offers similar picture performance benefits at a much lower cost.

That was the view espoused by Danny Tack, Philips' director for product strategy and planning, when HCC met up with him at the recent EISA (European Imaging and Sound Association) convention in Brussels.

It was during a demonstration of the brand's second-generation Moth Eye screen (price and release date still to be finalized), that the conversation turned to OLED technology.

'OLED, 4K... these things are under development. Everyone will want OLED but there will be strengths and weaknesses. With Moth Eye, we have overcome almost every weakness, almost to perfection. Our product will look as great as OLED.'

Flicker-free Active 3D

Of course, looking as good as OLED, for many, involves slimming the screen down to a depth of just 4mm



Moth Eye 2 (right) gets a new Smart-friendly handset



Danny Tack: 'Our second-generation Moth Eye TV will look as great as OLED'

– something that Philip's 240-segment LED backlit screen cannot achieve. Yet, while the TV retains its relative chunkiness, other improvements include a 'flicker-free' mode to combat Active Shutter 3D's traditional weakness, a new retarder film in the Moth Eye panel, and video processing tweaks to improve contrast. When shown alongside last year's Moth Eye TV (the 46PFL9706) the subjective difference in contrast was clearly noticeable, with greater shadow detailing. And next to a regular LED screen it was even more impressive.

Other new developments away from the TV's picture quality focus on its usability. Firstly, the user interface has undergone a complete overhaul, replacing the over-sized, blue-tinted icons with smaller, more colourful 720p graphics that slide horizontally across the screen. And the handset has been revamped, too – gone

is the 'soap bar' design, and in its place comes a more conventional-looking zapper with a dedicated source button (finally), a rather nifty keyboard on the rear for control of Smart TV features, and RF rather than IR transmission.



«Rewind

What was hot in home cinema a decade ago?

Find out as we peel back the pages on the August 2002 issue of HCC...



Struggling to keep up with the latest developments in AV tech? Never fear, as the *HCC* team unleashed a 16-page guide promising 'absolutely everything you need to know about DVD, widescreen TV, 5.1 sound & more'. Yamaha was apparently out for revenge on its critics, with the new flagship DSP-ZA1 eight-channel AV amp making a serious impact on our reviewers. Meanwhile, Panasonic beat the likes of JVC, Samsung and Sanyo (remember them?) to take top honours in our roundup of one-box home cinemas.

And it was a time of celebration for geeks everywhere as *The Fellowship of the Ring* arrived on UK DVD. The only question was whether or not to wait for the Extended Cut arriving a few months further down the line...

OLED takes pole at Monaco

But LG reveals that its 84in 4K TV will sell for a similar price

While some AV brands struggle under huge financial losses, LG obviously has a few won to throw around – the South Korean giant chose to hold the European launch of the 55EM960V OLED TV in Monaco in May, and roped in some friends from the worlds of Formula One, film and, er, super-modelling to help. *HCC* snuck through security to see what the fuss was about.

The main announcement concerned price and availability, with LG confirming that the 55in next-gen display will be available for pre-order from July with a €9,000 ticket – so expect it to retail around the £8,000 mark. Pre-ordered units (LG will be demoing the TV in Harrods and branches of John Lewis) will surface towards the end of the year.

In the history of television, there have been very few innovations as impactful as the coming of OLED. It is truly above all



Havis Kwon: 'OLED is truly above all expectations and beyond your imagination'

expectations and beyond everyone's imagination,' said Havis Kwon, President and CEO of LG's Home Entertainment Company. Similar endorsements came from the amassed celebrities – F1 drivers David Coulthard and Sebastian Vettel, model Gemma Sanderson and director Jean-Jacques Annaud. We assume all four of them

will get an OLED screen in the post come Christmas.

Bigger, better, same price

An intriguing side story to arise from the 55EM960V launch is that the brand's 84in 4K resolution 84LM960 screen will also reach UK shores at around the

same time and for roughly the same price. So, on one hand LG will be pushing OLED as the superior screen technology ('We plan to make OLED synonymous with LG,' states Kwon), while simultaneously releasing a bigger, more advanced display (in terms of panel resolution) using traditional LED technology.

Choices, choices...



Driven to perfection: Sebastian Vettel checks out LG's OLED TV

BD phone home



Spielberg's 1982 sci-fi classic *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* will be making its long-awaited bow on Blu-ray in the UK on November 12. The 30th Anniversary Edition features a digitally remastered version of the film with remixed DTS-HD MA 7.1 audio. As well as extras from the previous DVD releases, the BD also offers an all-new interview with the director and *The E.T. Journals*, which distributor Universal Pictures describes as 'never-before-seen behind-the-scenes footage [that] gives viewers a unique feeling of being on set and what it was like to make *E.T.*' www.universalpictures.co.uk

Hunger strikes



The US branch of Lionsgate has announced that *The Hunger Games* will be hitting DVD and BD on that side of the pond on August 18. Blu-ray specifications include DTS-HD MA 7.1 audio, an eight-part *Making of...* documentary, three featurettes, a marketing archive, a full-length Panam propaganda video from the movie, an interview with director Gary Ross and an exclusive extra titled *Preparing for The Games: A Director's Process*. Expect a similar UK release around the same time, albeit slightly cut (as was the 12A-rated cinema release over here). www.lionsgate.com

Dead-time story



The second season of the hit US horror series *The Walking Dead* comes to BD and DVD in the UK on August 27. Following the first season's explosive finale, this extended second run continues the adventures of a small band of survivors seeking safe haven in a world overrun by zombies. While EntertainmentOne has yet to confirm any details about the UK release, we expect something similar to Anchor Bay's US four-disc package, which also promises episode commentaries, behind-the-scenes footage and *Making of...* featurettes. www.entertainmentone.co.uk

Mars attacked



Timed to coincide with the remake hitting cinemas this Summer, the 1990 sci-fi smash *Total Recall* is being revisited on Blu-ray on July 16. According to UK distributor StudioCanal, the Special Edition Triple Play Blu-ray will include a pair of commentaries, three featurettes, interviews, the trailer, a photo gallery and a 'Before and After' comparison. The latter extra leads us to believe that the UK BD will feature the same Paul Verhoeven-approved remaster being used on Lionsgate's upcoming US re-release of the film. www.studiocanal.co.uk

Audio artisan

Denon AVR-3313 → www.denon.co.uk



Denon has taken the wraps off its newest high-end AV receiver. Expected to retail for around £1,100 when it goes on sale this month, the 7.2-channel AVR-3313 is available in a choice of black and premium silver finishes and packs a mouthwatering feature set – as well as offering AirPlay streaming out of the box, you also get 4K video upscaling, triple HDMI outputs, unique DDSC-HD audio circuitry, iPod/iPhone Direct Connectivity via USB, Audyssey MultEQ XT optimisation tech and a redesigned GUI.

Tech Diary

Our calendar is here to make sure you don't miss out...

→ JUNE

29: Killer Joe

William 'The Exorcist' Friedkin ran afoul of US censors, who gave his new crime drama an NC-17 rating. See what all the fuss is about when it hits UK cinemas today. www.entertainmentone.co.uk

→ JULY

02: Project X

An extended cut of this 'ultimate party movie' explodes onto DVD and Blu-ray in the UK today. Can it possibly be as outrageous as they claim? There's only one way to find out for sure... www.warnerbros.co.uk



03: The Amazing Spider-Man

Marvel's most iconic superhero enters the third dimension for the first time as he tackles the Lizard in this big-budget reboot for the franchise. Swing down to your local cinema from today to catch it. www.sonypictures.co.uk

13: Hollywood dedication

The iconic Hollywood sign on Mount Lee was officially dedicated on this date in 1923. The sign originally read Hollywoodland and was only supposed to remain there for 18 months, but proved so popular that it's still there today (albeit without the final four letters).

23: Forever Marilyn

Released today, this boxset brings four of the screen siren's best-loved films to Blu-ray – *How to Marry a Millionaire*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *The Seven Year Itch* and *Some Like it Hot*. www.fox.co.uk

25: The Dark Knight Rises



The final part of Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy hits UK cinemas today. Will it have the superpowers needed to topple *Avengers* as the Summer's biggest comic book caper? www.warnerbros.co.uk

26: HCC #211

Your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and full-on software reviews. www.homecinemachoice.com

Olympic AV installation

Panasonic tech is going for gold at London 2012 Olympic Games

Panasonic has been involved with the Olympic Games as an Official Worldwide Olympic Partner for 25 years now. But nothing the AV giant has done in the past can compare with the sheer size of the delivery and installation of AV equipment it has undertaken for London 2012.

This year Panasonic is involved in every aspect of the event, from CCTV systems to broadcast cameras, large-screen LED displays to the TVs installed in the athletes' accommodations. All told it's the largest supply of AV equipment for any Olympic Games in Panasonic's history.

This (quite literally) Olympic undertaking has seen the tech giant deliver some 45 massive LED screens to 28 venues (a total screen area of 1,730m²), approximately 200 professional sound systems to 36 venues, roughly 12,000 TVs, 47 103in plasma screens inside venues, 22 projectors (not counting those used in the opening and closing ceremony – see below) and 2,500 AV security camera systems. On top of that, it's also responsible for a host of professional broadcast equipment and devices including some 300 P2HD/DVCPRO HD recorders, 1,000 TV monitors and 30 3D cameras.



Master of ceremonies

Additionally, the company's ultra-bright DZ21K Series projectors (pictured) will be used extensively in the opening and closing ceremonies. Panasonic claims this three-chip DLP projector is the smallest and lightest 20,000 Lumen model available. The actual content of the opening ceremony remained a closely guarded secret when HCC went to press, with artistic director Danny Boyle only revealing that it is called *Isles*



Sean Taylor: 'Every single Olympic venue has Panasonic technology in it'

of Wonder and has been inspired by William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*.

'We've been working on this project for five years,' revealed Sean Taylor, senior manager for Panasonic's London Olympic Project when HCC caught up with him. 'We've been working closely on all of the feasibility studies, the design and installation of the AV equipment in all the venues. When the equipment goes in, it's not the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games doing it, it's us.'

Panasonic is also hoping that it can incentivise athletes at the London Games. 'Every Olympic Gold medal winner will also be given a Panasonic TV. We might even throw in a Blu-ray player,'

revealed Taylor. He couldn't confirm which TV the winners would get, only that it definitely wouldn't be one of its 103in models...



Another LED display is installed

Pale performers



KEF has given its R Series loudspeakers a makeover with the debut of a new piano white high-gloss finish. Incorporating technology developed for the company's landmark Blade speakers, the R Series consists of the two-way R100 and three-way R300 bass reflex bookshelf speakers, the R500, R700 and R900 three-way bass reflex floorstanders, the R200c and R600c three-way bass reflex centre speakers, the R800ds three-way dipole and R400b powered subwoofer. Prices begin at £600 for a pair of R100s and go up to £2,750 for a pair of R900s. www.kef.com

Roth adds to OLi



Roth AV has added to its range of OLi loudspeakers with new centre-channel and subwoofer models. The two-way OLi C20 centre speaker retails for around £90 and features a pair of 5in woofers and a 1in woofer. Meanwhile, the £200 OLi KH20 subwoofer is on hand to take care of bass duties with its 150W internal amplifier, 8in forward-firing active PolyCel driver and a cabinet that embraces angled lines in order to avoid what Roth calls the 'ugly box' look frequently embraced by subwoofer designers. Meow. www.rothaudio.co.uk

Budget bigscreen



Looking for an affordable way to jump into true bigscreen home cinema? If so, then you might want to take a look at ViewSonic's new Pro6200 DLP projector. Admittedly, the fact that it only boasts a native picture resolution of 720p will undoubtedly put some people off. But on the positive side, it will only set you back a meagre £450. Other features include a claimed contrast ratio of 3,000:1 and 2,700 Lumens brightness, auto keystone correction functionality and an integrated 5W speaker. www.viewsoniceurope.com

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*Hard disk capacity assumes standard definition recording and may vary according to actual broadcast transmission rates. †On demand services are provided by third parties and may be chargeable. To get Smart TV features you must connect to the Internet using your broadband router; at least 2 Mbps download speed is recommended. The Freeview service is subject to coverage. An aerial upgrade may be required. The FREEVIEW+ HD words and logos are trade marks of DTV Services Ltd. All other brand and product names are or may be trade marks of, and are used to identify products or services of, their respective owners.



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What the critics say:

twenty.22

"Immensely open, dynamic and fast with massive musicality" - Hi-Fi Choice, June '12



"The PMC's stand alone in the winner's circle"

- What Hi-Fi, Jan '12

twenty.23

"It does a remarkable job of delivering an essentially full bandwidth sound, with fine neutrality and excellent stereo imaging...clean crisp and agile" - Hi-Fi Choice, Jan '12



twenty.24

"...they captured everything perfectly and had me right on the edge of my seat with excitement!"

- Hi-Fi World, June '12



Book a demonstration
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ATL™
Advanced Transmission Line

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Lemon takes on pirates

Keith Lemon is the unlikely new face of anti-piracy campaigning in the UK. The Industry Trust for UP Awareness has joined forces with distributor Lionsgate to use clips from its forthcoming comedy *Keith Lemon The Film* in its new 'Moments Worth Paying For' trailer. According to the official announcement, the campaign 'helps drive messaging to the core audience of young males in a humorous and engaging way'. We'll let you make up your own mind about that...

2 Instant HD

LOVEFiLM has finally added HD content to its LOVEFiLM Instant streaming service. 1080p material is only available via PC or Mac, with Xbox 360 and Smart TV versions limited to 720p. The company is working to bring the HD content to iPad and PS3 users in the near future.

3 You're fired!

Wondering what happened to YouView's hotly-tipped Spring 2012 launch? According to a 'senior source', Lord Sugar is the man responsible for the delay, claiming that the troubled IPTV service still isn't good enough to unleash on the public yet.

4 Hail to the chief

Former Sony India Managing Director Masaru Tamagawa has been appointed the new President of Sony Europe. He replaces Fujio Nishida, who has been named Chairman of Sony Europe. 'Mr Tamagawa's unique expertise, drive and dedication to frontline sales will help put Sony Europe firmly on the path to future growth,' stated Sony Corporation's new President and CEO Kazuo Hirai.

5 Second screen takes off

Research undertaken by FutureSource states that the 'second screen' concept is now the norm for many people. 62 per cent of respondents claimed to use a portable device such as a laptop, tablet or smartphone while watching TV, rising to a huge 85 per cent in people aged between 16 and 18 years of age.

News x10

6 Enhanced Sky Guide

Sky has introduced a number of enhancements to its EPG, including a sleeker interface with HD graphics, a navigation update (boosting the number of channels on each page of the TV guide from six to eight), new landing pages for different genres and the ability to browse recordings by genre. The new features will be rolled out to Sky+HD customers during the course of the year.

7 Smart TV users unlike Facebook

Social Media and Smart TV may not be the match made in heaven that many expected, if new research from metadata outfit Rovi is to be believed. 'It's not something people necessarily want... Data suggests that customer engagement with Social Media is inversely proportionate to the size of the screen used for it,' claims Rovi Chief Evangelist Richard Bullwinkle.

8 Dolby's BD upsampling

Dolby Laboratories has announced that it plans to 'unlock the full potential of television, movie and music content' on Blu-ray through 96kHz upsampling. The new Dolby TrueHD coding solution claims to offer all the advantages of 96kHz quality audio while 'simultaneously reducing the incidence of digital artifacts introduced during the content creation process.'

9 US CI legend retires

Custom install legend Jeremy Burkhardt has stepped down as President at SpeakerCraft following a company restructuring by owner Nortek Inc. Former Proficient Audio bigwig Keith Marshall has been named Interim President.

10 Try before you buy

You can now check out how any Philips TV will look in your home before you buy one. A new app allows you to print out an Augmented Reality marker and place it in the spot in your home where the TV would go. You then simply launch the new app on a smartphone or tablet, point the device's camera at the location, and you'll see a virtual 3D model of the TV



appear in the relevant spot. The app is available now from both the Apple App Store and Android Market.

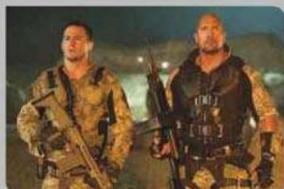
Premiere

HCC's guide to what's happening in the world of TV and films...

Marvel-ous villains

Casino Royale's Mads Mikkelsen is in talks to play a bad guy in *Thor 2*. He'll be appearing alongside Tom Hiddleston, who returns as Thor's evil adopted brother Loki.

No-go Joe



Paramount has bumped the release of *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* from this Summer to March 2013. The studio claims this was done to allow more time for the 3D conversion, but rumours indicate that the film is actually being reworked to give Channing Tatum's character a larger role.

Killer television

Ever wondered what FBI Agent Clarice Starling got up to between *Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal*? US TV network Lifetime is currently developing a new series called *Clarice* that will follow her early exploits after graduating from the FBI academy. The show looks set to go up against NBC's *Hannibal*, a *Dexter*-esque series exploring the serial killer's back story.

We asked...

Is your home cinema a one-box system or have you built it up from separate components?

- One-box system
- Built from separates

3%

97%

Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

Gods and monsters

Wrath of the Titans → Warner Home Video
→ All-region BD/R2 DVD

Sam Worthington's demi-god Perseus is back in action, battling the escaped Titan leader Kronos alongside the feisty Andromeda (Rosamund Pike) in this sequel to the 2010 fantasy blockbuster *Clash of the Titans*. Due for release in the UK this Summer, the 2D Blu-ray promises DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio, two Maximum Movie Modes (*The Path of Men* and *The Path of the Gods*) and a trio of deleted scenes. A 3D Blu-ray is also being issued at the same time.



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Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News (November 2009)

'Reference-grade performance that you'd struggle to match
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Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi+ (Issue 66)

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Howard Kneller, SoundStage! (September 2009)

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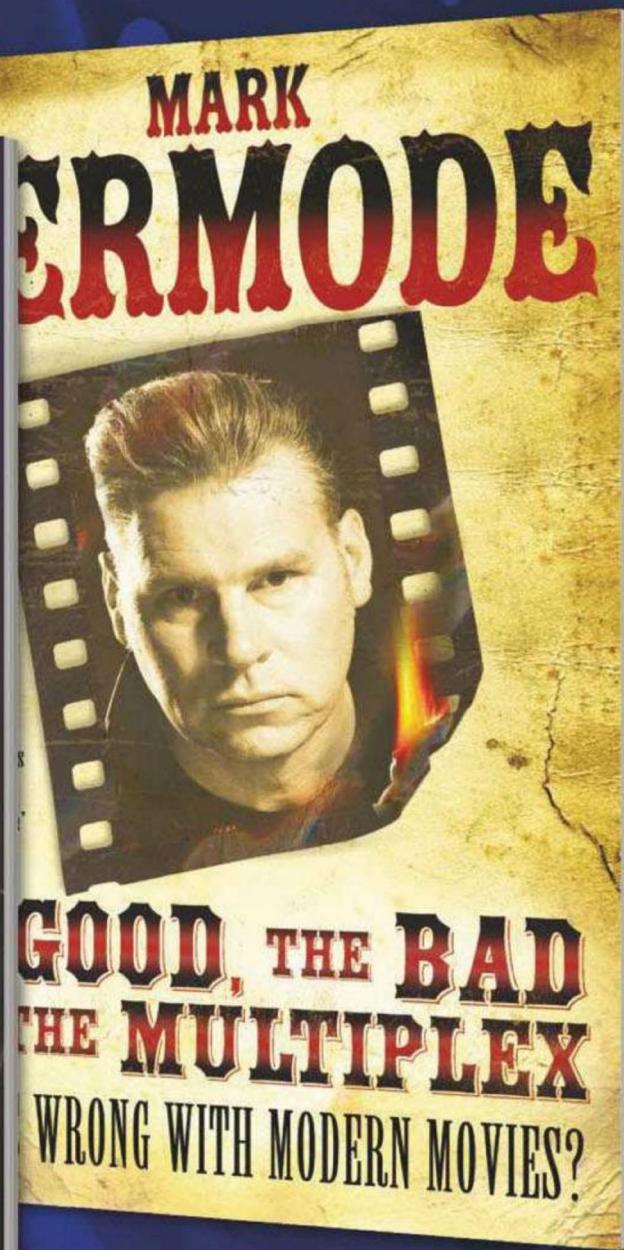
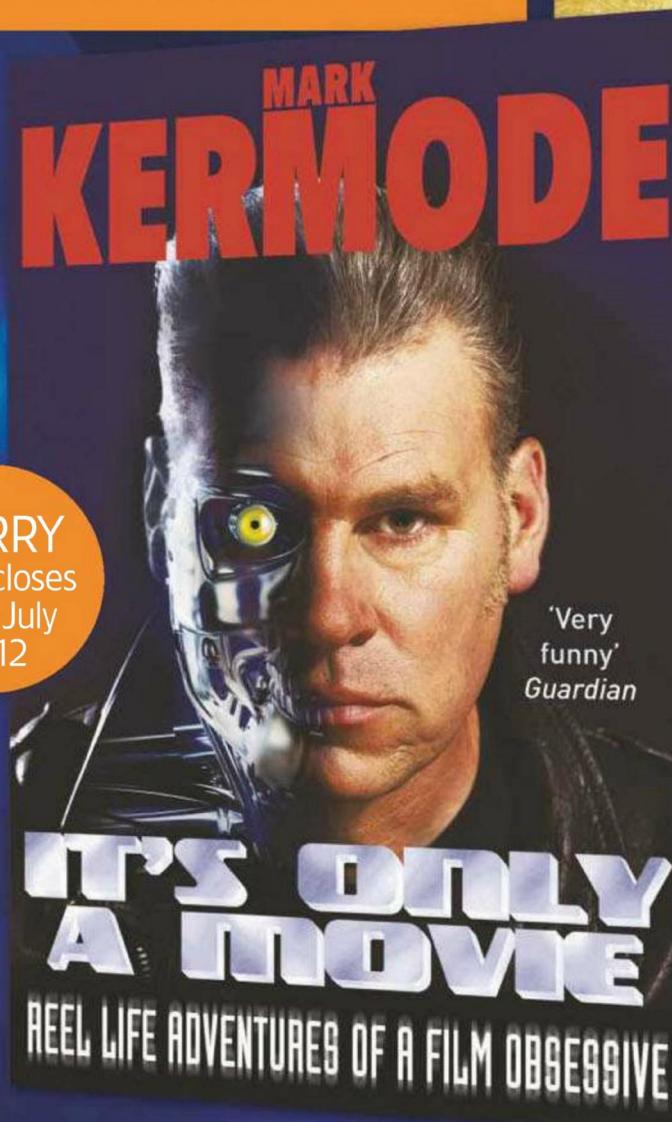


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TOSHIBA 55ZL2 → £7,000 Approx



With 4K upscaling
and glasses-free 3D,
Toshiba's 55ZL2 is the
most advanced TV
on the market



Toshiba's 55ZL2 rewrites TV history on not one but two fronts, comes fully-loaded with unprecedented amounts of processing power and looks amazing to boot. In other words, it's the shape of TVs to come. Yet there are a few bumps along the way...

Most flagship TVs usually feel pretty smug about themselves if they deliver even one genuinely groundbreaking AV feature. But Toshiba's 55ZL2 pushes the TV envelope in not one but two radical new directions.

First up is the screen's resolution. For instead of the 1,920 x 1,080 pixel count of today's Full HD TVs, the 55ZL2 squeezes 3,840 x 2,160 pixels into its 55in screen. As we saw recently with Sony's VW1000ES projector, this level of resolution can have a mind-blowing impact on picture quality, so I'm ridiculously excited to find it now on a TV. Even when that TV costs £7,000...

The 55ZL2's other huge advance is that it lets you watch

3D without wearing glasses. With most punters apparently reckoning that needing to wear glasses is what most puts them off 3D, this huge advance could make 3D the must-have game-changer the AV manufacturers have so long wanted it to be.

Before I find out how successful Toshiba's twin advances are, though, there's a lot of 'premium TV' scene-setting to be done, kicking off with the 55ZL2's design. Which is, in a word, delicious.

Its bezel is outstandingly slim, but also robust thanks to its metallic finish. And, while you can wall-mount the set, I found its svelte frame looking its best when mounted atop its supremely sleek, rectangular 'outline' stand. ➤

John Archer
has been writing about
TVs for *Home Cinema
Choice* for longer than
anyone can remember.
– but this is the first
time he's experienced
4K on a screen at home



Connections are as comprehensive as you would expect of such an ambitious TV, including four HDMIIs, USB ports, and built-in Wi-Fi (plus an Ethernet port if you'd rather go the hardwired route).

The HDMIIs are built to the 3D-friendly v1.4 specification, and the USBs can be used for either playing back multimedia files or for recording to USB HDDs from the built-in Freeview HD tuner.

Actually, the 55ZL2's carriage of Toshiba's powerful CEVO Engine processing gives the USBs a highly unusual third purpose. For you can attach them to the colour meter contained in Toshiba's £200 TPA-1 accessory pack, enabling the TV to auto-calibrate its picture settings. At this price, though, you might expect the TPA-1 to be bundled.

The LAN/Wi-Fi options let you stream stuff from a connected DLNA PC, as well as taking the 55ZL2 online with Toshiba's proprietary Places service.

Going places

Places gets off to a great start by enjoying possibly the online TV world's prettiest and most user-friendly interface, with its large, colourful graphics and brilliantly simple organisation.

There are commendable efforts at personalising the Places experience too, such as support for multiple

'The TV upscales Full HD sources to 4K successfully, making them look more textured and detailed'

users to establish individual favourite lists and presentation preferences. The TV's built-in camera can even use face-recognition to identify who's using it and automatically switch to that user's preferred settings. Whether you'll bother with this is a different matter.

The simple but significant problem with Places is that for now, at least, it just doesn't have enough content. A few bits and bobs have been added recently, with the most significant services now comprising the BBC iPlayer, YouTube, Acetrax, Twitter, Facebook, Viewster, Daily Motion, Box Office 365, Woomi, Cartoon Network and HiT Entertainment. But this remains far short of what you can get elsewhere, with the lack of Netflix and LOVEFiLM being particularly painful.

Predictably for a seven-grand TV, the 55ZL2 is packed with picture calibration aids for people not wanting to use the TPA-1 automated system. Full colour and gamma management are available, along with much-appreciated control over all the many picture processing tools the set carries.

These processing options include dynamic contrast, noise reduction and, most significantly, Toshiba's Resolution+ system for adding detail to pictures. On the 55ZL2, this latter system can be used to upscale HD to

the screen's native 'Quad HD' resolution. With native 4K content in painfully short supply (more on this in a moment), this upscaling is of tantamount importance to the 55ZL2's appeal.

As we discovered while reviewing the Sony VW1000ES, 4K is a hardware-driven phenomenon, at least where the home is concerned. While 4K digital film masters are now commonplace in commercial cinemas, there's currently no clear path for getting these gorgeous things into our homes. This is partly

Specs appeal:
The lenticular panel of the ZL2 means you can watch 3D without glasses



because the file sizes involved with 4K films make Blu-ray's capacities look puny, and partly because there appears to be reluctance among the film studios for making 4K video available to the domestic market.

It doesn't help, either, that there's no finalised standard for shipping 4K via HDMI cables. And actually, it's this that causes the 55ZL2 a major problem. Unlike Sony's VW1000ES projector, the 55ZL2 seemingly can't handle 4K delivered by HDMI. Attaching a 4K-capable PC rig via HDMI resulted in the PC simply

refusing to acknowledge that the 55ZL2 was a 4K screen – even though the same PC worked fine with the Sony projector.

Discussions with Toshiba confirm that the 55ZL2's HDMI socket currently can't take native 4K, and quite possibly never will. This is a huge blow to anyone thinking about getting a 55ZL2 as a future-proofed TV ahead of any incoming 4K source explosion.

At which point I'd better stress that the 55ZL2 is actually capable of playing 4K. Anyone with a high-

resolution digital camera, for instance, can enjoy their photos via the USB ports at that resolution. And such pictures can look truly stunning.

Dealers, meanwhile, can show off the 55ZL2's 4K video capabilities using a special server that Toshiba has built expressly for the purpose, and an unusual chunky digital port that sticks straight out of the TV's rear top-right corner. Tragically, though, there's no apparent way for home users to make use of this port.

Luckily, Toshiba sent one of its 4K demo servers to us along with the ➤



55ZL2 review unit, so I was able to witness the screen's full 4K potential in all its glory.

The server's content comprised a show-reel of various busy, beautiful scenes shot by Toshiba especially for the 4K demo. And absolutely every last frame of it was mesmerising, thanks to the levels of detail, clarity, subtlety, accuracy and purity – levels that simply have never been seen before on a consumer TV.

Any doubts over whether you would really be able to appreciate the step up to 4K from Full HD on a TV – even one as big as 55in – are instantly crushed, as even the most ludditistic viewer will clearly be able to see the difference.

The only problem with all this 4K awesomeness is that it makes the inability of normal punters to enjoy 4K video for themselves at home all the more difficult to take.

Upscaling

The unexpurgated joy of watching true 4K on the 55ZL2 also puts considerable pressure on the set's upscaling talents, given that these will provide most people with their only super-hi-res thrills. Just as well, then, that the set upscales Full HD sources to 4K pretty successfully, making them look more densely textured and detailed without generating much shimmer, lagging noise or artefacting.

Even action-packed sequences from *Chronicle*, during which practically everything on the screen

is moving, the upscaled pictures look clean and involving. This lack of processing side effects is impressive when you consider how many extra pixels of picture information the CEVO Engine is having to calculate in real time.

However, while upscaled 4K pictures on the 55ZL2 look better than Full HD ones on normal TVs, they're no match for the gorgeousness of true 4K sources. Whether or not the HD-to-4K upscaling performance is sufficient to justify the TV's £7,000 price tag can only be a personal decision – probably based on whether you're rich or not.

Turning to the 55ZL2's other headline ability, its glasses-free 3D, the results are less universally impressive. With the 3D versions of *Tangled* and *Pirates of The Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*, my experience was mixed in the extreme. On the upside, there is something truly remarkable – liberating, even – about being able to see genuine 3D pictures coming out of a telly box without needing to don any glasses. It makes the experience feel enormously more natural, direct and unfatiguing.

To this extent it fully justifies the enormous technical efforts of Toshiba in making the technology work, and adds credence to the argument that 3D can enjoy a renaissance once glasses-free technology is commonplace.

Toshiba is also to be congratulated for making its

Demo delight:
This 4K player is used by Toshiba dealers to demo the TV's native 4K talents – but buyers don't get to keep it



glasses-free 3D images appear miles better on the finished 55ZL2 than they did during show demos as little as a year ago. The 3D effect looks deeper than expected, images predominantly seem detailed and sharp, and rather brilliantly the combination of Toshiba's complicated lenticular lens array on the screen and powerful CEVO image processing allows the glasses-free 3D effect to support multiple viewing angles for up to five different viewing zones (with each zone potentially occupied by multiple viewers).

The problem, though, is that for all Toshiba's admirable efforts, glasses-free 3D pictures on the 55ZL2 are no match in pure quality terms for a good 3D performance from a normal 'with glasses' 3DTV. For starters, Toshiba's technology struggles to resolve objects in the distance as crisply as objects in the foreground. The castle on the hill and the lanterns coming out of it in chapter eight of *Tangled*, for instance, appear slightly out of focus.

Another issue is that despite Toshiba's efforts to support multiple viewing angles and positions, you have to sit with your head very still if you don't want to experience

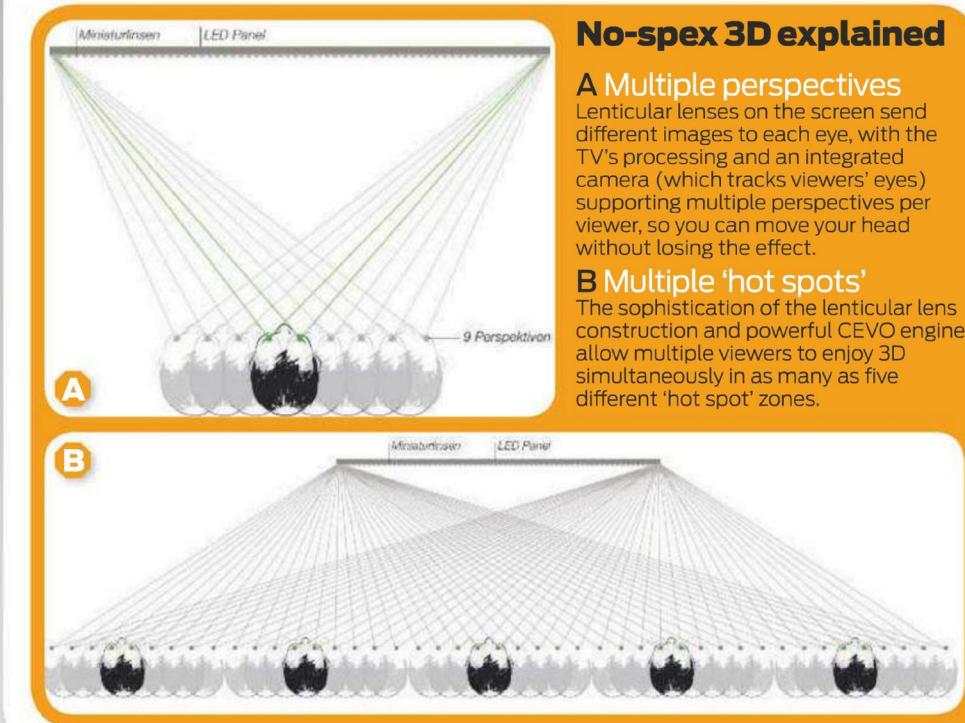
No-spex 3D explained

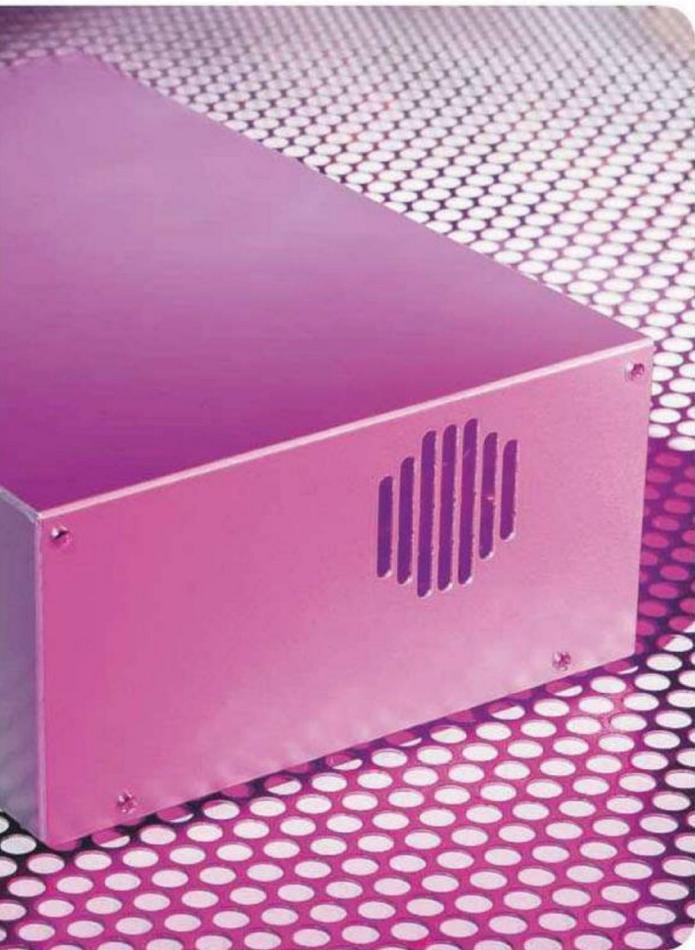
A Multiple perspectives

Lenticular lenses on the screen send different images to each eye, with the TV's processing and an integrated camera (which tracks viewers' eyes) supporting multiple perspectives per viewer, so you can move your head without losing the effect.

B Multiple 'hot spots'

The sophistication of the lenticular lens construction and powerful CEVO engine allow multiple viewers to enjoy 3D simultaneously in as many as five different 'hot spot' zones.





distracting focus 'shifts' across all or part of the picture.

Remote:
The ZL2 ships with Toshiba's familiar 'slider' handset

Finally, 3D pictures betray small signs of the physical structure of the lenticular lens array that sits across the 55ZL2's screen. At its lowest level, this consists of a slight sense of



horizontal line structure in 3D images. More disturbing, though, is the appearance in a couple of places of a wavy line effect. I'm not sure if these wavy patches were a result of manufacturing errors in our test sample or are symptomatic of issues with trying to make the lenticular 3D effect work across a large TV screen. But what's not in doubt is that they place a significant 'third wall' between you and the material you're watching.

I pondered at this point if it might have been better from a pure picture quality point of view if Toshiba had used the 55ZL2's 4K resolution to deliver a Full HD Passive 3D experience, despite the fact that this would have required glasses. Ultimately, though, for all its flaws the experience of watching 3D with no spex on still feels like a watershed moment in TV history – and I admire Toshiba for delivering it first.

Back to reality

Before trying to make sense of the 55ZL2's 4K and 3D pros and cons, I should stress that it's a very fine performer in more 'normal' ways. Its contrast, colour accuracy, 2D sharpness and motion handling are on more or less the same level as Toshiba's impressive YL863/WL863 CEVO-powered TVs. Its sound, too, is more powerful and well-rounded than that of many super-skinny televisions.

While the 55ZL2's general picture quality is good, though, it's not spectacular enough to justify the set's price tag. So for that we need to go back to the upscaled 4K video and glasses-free 3D performance.

When showing native 4K images, the 55ZL2 delivers a level of picture quality that's miles better than anything any other TV has ever produced. And being able to watch 3D without the hassle of glasses feels so 'right' you have to experience it to believe it.

In the end, though, not making the HDMI compatible with current or, presumably, future 4K sources, together with the fact that the set's 3D pictures aren't as good in raw quality terms as those of a normal Active shutter or Passive 3DTV, leave Toshiba's 55ZL2 feeling more like a fascinating experiment, and not something I'm entirely comfortable recommending that you splurge £7,000 on. Although if you have the money, and can't wait for other brands to catch up, I'm sure you won't be disappointed.

► Specifications

3D: Yes glasses-free!

Full HD: Yes 3,840 x 2,160

Tuner: Freeview HD and satellite (not Freesat)

Connections: 4 x v1.4 HDMI; component; composite; USB input; Ethernet; MHL; Scart (via adaptor); D-Sub PC input

Smart TV: Yes Toshiba Places

Sound: 2 x 10W

Brightness (claimed): 450cd/m²

Contrast ratio (claimed): 9,000,000:1

Dimensions (off stand): 1253(w) x 832(h) x 35(d)mm

Weight: 30.5kg

Features: Glasses-free 3D; 4K resolution; CEVO Engine processors; multimedia playback via USB and DLNA networking; optional auto-calibration kit supported; 4K upscaling; AMR 800 processing; 2D to 3D conversion; colour and gamma management; Audyssey EQ



HCC VERDICT

Toshiba 55ZL2 → £7,000 approx

→ Supplier: www.toshiba.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 856 0730

Highs: Upscaled 4K content impresses; liberating glasses-free 3D; gorgeous design and build

Lows: No 4K support via HDMI; blurring with 3D; expensive

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

Onkyo's quest for higher-fi

MLP lossless audio music downloads and cutting-edge electronics will usher in a new era of high-res home entertainment, promises Onkyo. **Steve May** travelled to Osaka to hear the future

Onkyo is on a mission. The market-leading AV and hi-fi brand wants to nudge music lovers and multichannel aficionados toward a world of higher fidelity. It's a notoriously difficult job. During the heyday of packaged media, similar quests met with only limited success. To try again, in a nascent era of casual downloads and stuttering streams, seems extraordinarily ambitious. But you can't fault Onkyo for trying.

The Japanese brand is taking a two-pronged (or should that be stereophonic?) approach, by introducing the Dolby TrueHD/MLP audio codec as a download format, and pioneering hardware refinements within its AV receivers and two-channel amplifiers.

To learn more, I flew to Onkyo heartland: Osaka, Japan. HCC has visited the company several times on its own turf, but this year we weren't returning to the HQ once so familiar. That building has been levelled and the land sold off. A hospital is going to be built where once only hi-fi healing took place, I was told, as we trudged past the building site to a consolidated secondary location, home of a newly constructed listening room.

It's here we're to get demonstrations of the brand's trend-setting high-resolution music download service. Multichannel MLP underpins the Dolby TrueHD codec, which regular readers

will know as the second-choice HD audio system found on Blu-ray movies. MLP itself was also the basis of the DVD-Audio format, but this is the first time it's been commercialised *sans disc*. Around 1,000 tracks have been assembled for Onkyo's MLP charge, culled from local and International speciality labels such as Pony Canyon and 2L. The playback receiver for our demos is Onkyo's freshly-baked TX-NR818 receiver, which uniquely supports the file format.

Hi-res downloads

It's worth pointing out that the e-Onkyo store isn't new – it's been open for business since 2005. Apparently that date is a sore point. Apple launched iTunes just three days before



Shopping spree:
The e-Onkyo store will go global this Autumn





Onkyo's groundbreaking venture was due to go live. 'Admittedly they had millions of songs and we only had eleven,' says Masahiro (Marty) Kashiwai, Onkyo's marketing manager, 'but at least ours were all hi-res!'

Taku Kurosawa oversees Onkyo's digital music service. He's excited about the adoption of Dolby MLP, but explains the outlet already supports a wide range of high-performance file types. 'We carry WMA lossless, FLAC, PCM, WAV and DSD.' Content is primarily jazz and classical, although there is a smattering from the mainstream, including Queen's *Greatest Hits* in 92kHz/24-bit. Kurosawa says the brand is actively seeking new content partners. A deal with Warner Japan for 400 high-resolution titles is on the table even as we visit.

The grand plan is to take the e-Onkyo store global this Autumn. The problem, of course, is copyright clearances, which becomes a minefield when you start dealing with multiple labels and major artists.

The MLP demos transpire to be absolutely beautiful. A selection of content is played, exhibiting a clarity and scale normally associated only with DVD-A and Super Audio CD platters.

Having heard raw MLP, I immediately want it – but I suspect I could be in for a protracted wait. 'The software business is a dangerous area. Record labels can be very tough to negotiate with,' Hiroshi Nakano, Onkyo Corp's vice president, later confides to me. 'There are many things still to discuss when it comes to what content can be sold globally.'

All Onkyo's MLP downloads are DRM-free, and can be played on all the brand's 2012 receivers from the TX-NR717 upwards. Onkyo envisages users will either play them direct from a USB stick or across a network from NAS or PC (consequently, this year SAMBA server support joins DLNA). There is one area, though, where the format is severely lacking: metadata. You get

nothing with your downloads bar the file title, not even sleeve artwork; in an increasingly graphically-rich media world this is a tad underwhelming. 'Dolby is working hard to improve this right now,' reassures Kurosawa. 'Maybe next year?'

Fine-tuned hardware

Of course, Onkyo's push for higher-fi extends to hardware, too. Norimasa Kitagawa is the senior engineer responsible for sound-tuning Onkyo's best-selling AVRs, including the TX-NR818 and this Autumn's incoming TX-NR1010, TX-NR3010 and TX-NR5010 models. No easy task, given that every year he's expected to wring a little more performance from his boxes.

Kitagawa says that aside from the addition of MLP and DSD file support, one of the biggest changes to Onkyo's 2012 AV receivers is structural. A peak beneath the lid confirms additional metalwork. 'If you look at these struts, they are there for extra rigidity,' he points out. 'Previously we did not have them, but they improve audio quality.'

Hi-res hero: The forthcoming TX-NR818 receiver will be MLP compatible

Music mogul: HCC quizzes Onkyo's digital audio guru Taku Kurosawa





Inside story: Structural changes, including new anti-resonance struts (above), have been implemented on Onkyo's 2012 AVR range



As ever, the internal layout is neat and symmetrical, with pre-amp and main amp sections clearly divided; each channel is separately driven. The power supply and capacitors mirror last year's kit, albeit with some component improvements. 'Amplifier-wise, the circuit design has been pretty much fixed from the TX-NR-05 models, but what we have done is improve the anti-vibration construction,' he says. 'Every time we alter our cosmetic design,

the chassis differs and that affects the construction.'

One area where there are genuine opportunities for tweaks is the pre-amp, says Marty Kashiwai, 'because every year we add a new feature, the

DSP aspect of the AVR changes.'

But far more dramatic improvements are on the cards, previewed to *HCC* in the form of a highly competitive new two-channel stereo amplifier from the brand. The new model features DIDRC (Dynamic Intermodulation Distortion Reduction Circuitry), an Onkyo technology which reduces distortion in the super-high frequency range.

First introduced in top-of-the-line hardware in 2011, Onkyo describes DIDRC as a symmetrical amplifier circuit, characterised by very low high frequency distortion; it's used in place of a traditional Op-amp.

'PC audio sources typically come with many types of high-frequency noise, which leads to intermodulation distortion,' says Kitagawa. 'The DIDRC, which sits before the DAC in the stereo amp, effectively reduces this.'

In subjective listening terms, the biggest improvement that DIDRC brings is significantly enhanced dynamics. Two-channel sources literally spring toward the listener. Its implementation in the incoming stereo amp brings with it an excitement and pace that belies its £400 price point. The difference it makes when listening to stereo is obvious and significant. The prospect of a multichannel implementation is positively mouth-watering.

'The next step for us is how we can develop DIDRC and bring it to AV receivers. That is our next objective,' confirms Kashiwai. We can hardly wait.

Overleaf: Steve May reports on the changing nature of Japan's AV stores

'Onkyo wants to nudge music lovers and multichannel fans toward a world of higher fidelity'

the

Inside Kitagawa's home theatre

What does the home cinema of a leading Japanese audio engineer look like?

Kitagawa-san kindly opened the doors to his private theatre for *HCC* to exclusively peer though. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his listening room doesn't embrace the design tropes of a Western home theatre. Instead, it's more in keeping with the practical aesthetic of a Japanese hi-fi company's listening room.

Providing the muscle is an Integra Research RDA-7 7-channel power amp (Integra is Onkyo's high-end custom-install brand), allied to two pre-amps: the Integra DHC-80.1 for high-res HD formats, and the RDC-7.1 for SD content. Kitagawa uses two disc spinners – an Integra Research RDV-1.1 DVD deck and a Pioneer BDP-330 Blu-ray player. Other

sources include a home-made media centre PC and an Apple TV streamer.

The front soundstage features a pair of JBL S3500 loudspeakers

and a JBL S1500C centre. Providing the rears are Onkyo D-407s. The projector is a JVC DLA-HD1 model, which fires onto an OS Screen Puremat2 plus screen.





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Is there trouble in paradise?

There's no finer place to browse electronics than Japan's towering tech stores, but are buyers losing their appetite for flatscreen TVs?

The perilous state of the TV industry can clearly be seen on the shop floors of Japan's biggest electrical retailers. For years, the country's tech superstores have served as a frenetic, compelling advert for the world's most advanced flatscreens.

But today that bluster has gone. I've visited the country twice this year, and it's clear that the traditional retail bedlam has died down, with TV no longer a big attraction. What were once hero products given pride of place in store are now being treated like has-beens.

The iconic Bic Camera superstore, located a few paces from Yurakucho station in Tokyo, once greeted visitors with a largescreen TV lightshow. But falling demand has seen this spectacular display ousted. In its place are racks of densely packed iPhone and iPad cases, miscellaneous tablet accessories and mobile phone adornments. Prime real estate has to pay its way in the Japanese capital and clearly there's more lucre in phone paraphernalia than bigscreen televisions. The reasons are entirely predictable. Japan has long since completed its digital switchover, special eco subsidies for new electronics have come to an end and a recession is biting.

The changing nature of entertainment is also having an effect. In Nipponbashi Denden Town, Osaka's answer to Tokyo's Akihabara area, once-busy electronics boutiques and second-hand stores now seem eerily quiet. When I popped by mid-week in May, a second-hand CD outlet had but a single shopper looking for rarities.

That said, even Japanese retail outlets stomped by an economic Godzilla are still more fun to explore than their international rivals. The monstrous Yodabashi Camera superstore in Osaka remains a great place to eye-up the latest glass, and there are thrillers to be found amongst the more familiar TVs on display. The Japanese iteration of Toshiba's ZL2 TV enjoyed a prime position when I paid a visit. Elsewhere, a Sharp promo was built almost exclusively around its

super-large screens. Sharp continues to make a big play of its 'buy bigger' mantra, which is quite a bold policy in Japan where dwellings are typically a little smaller.

LG has also made significant in-roads into the Japanese TV market of late, and can be found keenly promoting its Passive Cinema 3D sets. This beachhead is likely to serve the brand well when it begins the rollout of its first OLED models.

Costing OLED

Organic LED is a hot topic amongst Japanese TV manufacturers. Outmanoeuvred at CES by LG and Samsung, the big Japanese brands have been left debating how to catch up. Yet largescreen OLED is not an easy display technology to mass-produce. The cost and complexity caused Sony to abandon its consumer OLED programme back in 2008, having pioneered the first OLED TV in the shape of the 11in XEL-1. The brand has continued with organic EL displays for the professional business, but returning it to the high-street is no easy task.

OLED clearly has the potential to supersede LED LCD and plasma, but the start-up costs are huge and the commercial risk high. The challenge has brought Sony and Panasonic to the table to discuss the possibility of a joint venture to produce OLED panels, starting in 2015. Once bitter rivals, the unified threat of the fast-rising South Korean brands has led to a new pragmatism.

Any tie-up would allow the two brands to pool R&D resources and share costs. Both companies have posted historically huge losses this year, so there's little enthusiasm to pour any more money into their flagging screen businesses than is necessary. The good news is that Panasonic has reportedly developed a low-cost production technique, due to be trialled at its Himeji factory later this year. The results could be key not only to Panasonic's long-term TV business, but the popularisation of OLED and the survival of the Japanese TV industry in general. It may even dictate the future of Japan's magnificent AV superstores.

A: Osaka's Yodabashi Camera superstore remains a towering tech haven

B: Dedicated DVD stores show little sign of life

C: Japanese shoppers are now as likely to be targeted on the high street with tablet accessories and phone cases as high-end AV hardware

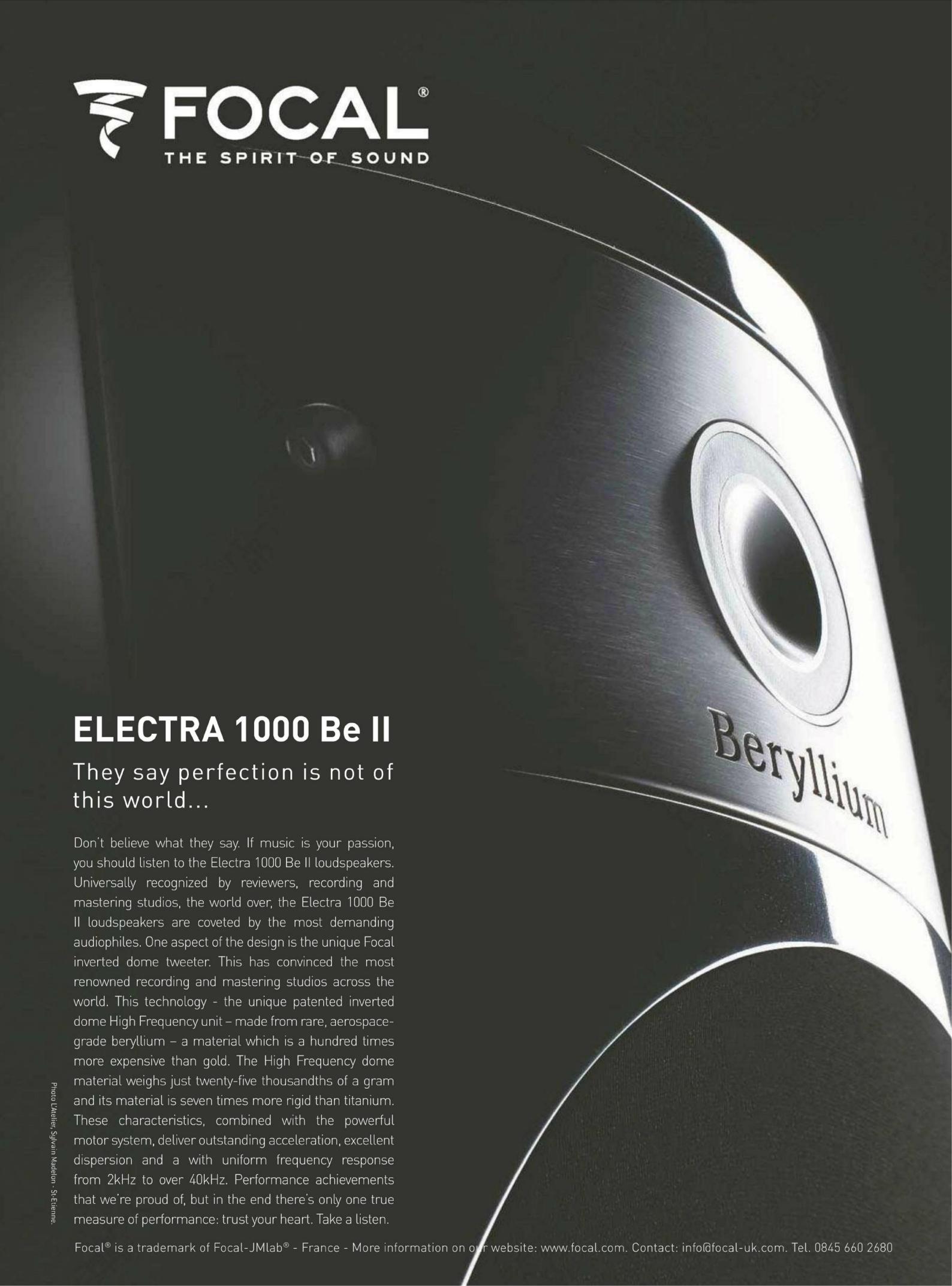
D: Sharp's 'buy bigger' campaign majors on screen sizes from 60in upwards

E: Sony's original OLED display, the 11in XEL-1. A possible joint venture with Panasonic could see bigger successors in the future

F: Toshiba's autostereoscopic Regza TV takes pride of place in the Yodabashi Camera store

G: A lone figure browses the platters in a second-hand CD shop





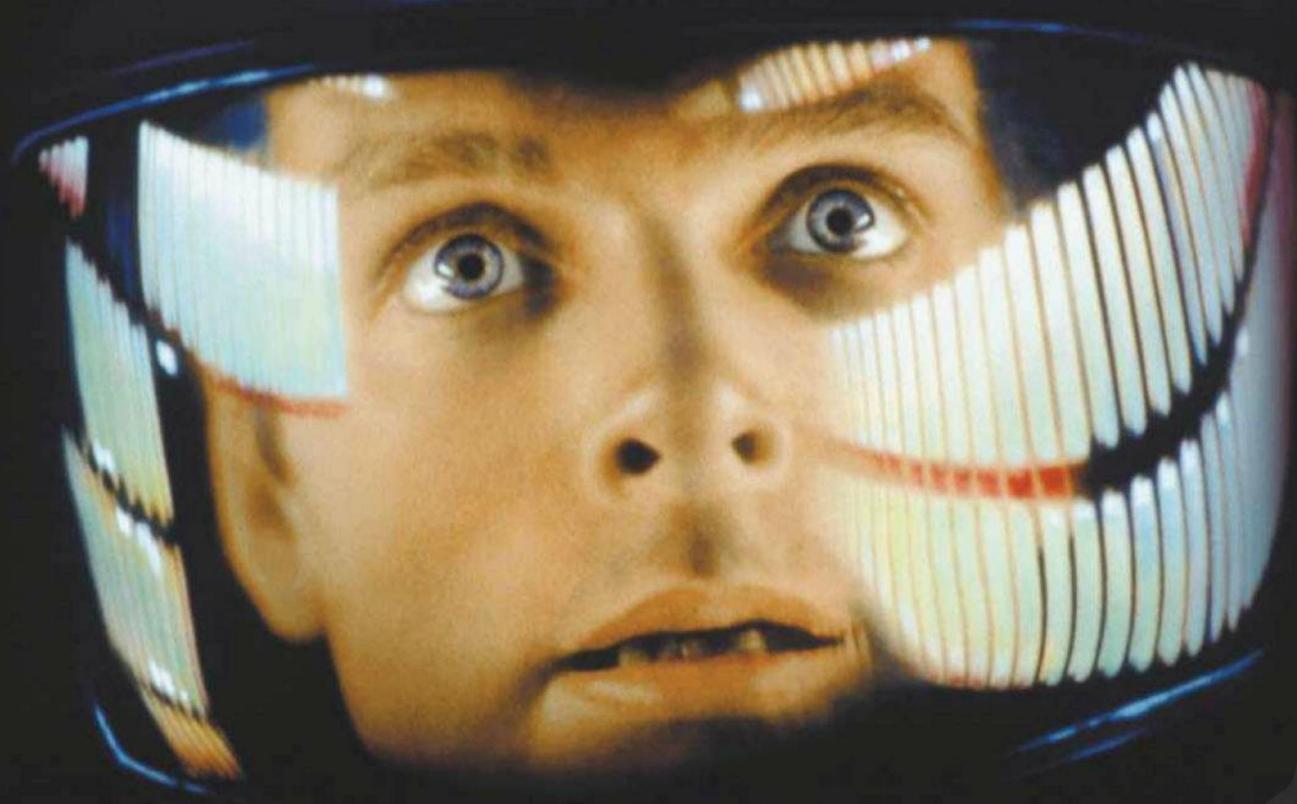
Beryllium

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So, you've watched Prometheus and now have a hankering for more bigscreen outer-space action. **Team HCC** is here to help with our...



ULTIMATE

Sci-Fi Movie Marathon



Star Trekkin': JJ. Abrams' 2009 reboot takes the veteran franchise to a whole new level

7pm

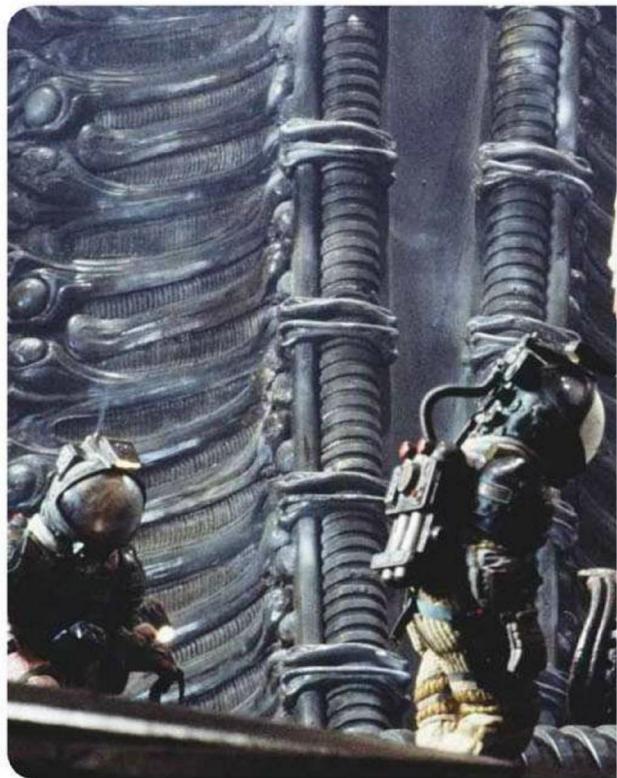
The system is fired up, other members of the house have been banished and the fridge is full of ice-cold snacks – it's time to begin.

The first disc in a 24-hour movie marathon needs to get the blood pumping straightaway, removing any lingering doubts that this really isn't the best way to spend a large chunk of your weekend. Look no further than *Starship Troopers*. Paul Verhoeven's galactic monster mash (and the last great sci-fi flick from a man who briefly ruled the genre) is big on action, gore and laughs and, despite running for over two hours, never lulls. Sure, the acting is generally awful and you'll wonder how a \$100m movie can end up looking so cheap, but it'll leave a smile on your face – and the BD's TrueHD 5.1 mix will warm your speakers up nicely, too.

9:15pm

Okay, one down, only rather a lot to go, and the best way to move deeper into the 24-hour marathon is with more of the same. *Starship Troopers* has given you a taste for hi-octane adventure and *Star Trek* carries on that flavour. And let's face it, you can't enjoy the ultimate sci-fi blowout without a bit of ...Trek action.

Rebooting the franchise with a fresh, young cast and giving hotshot director JJ Abrams a bigger-than-usual ...Trek budget of \$140m proved a masterstroke for studio Paramount. This 2009 flick is smart, slick and thrilling – and benefits from a Blu-ray release that's up there with the very best. The disc's 2.39:1 1080p visuals are sharper than a Romulan blade and the Dolby TrueHD 5.1 mix is awash with delicate, crisp effects and brooding bass. Quite frankly, it makes *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* look like a student film.



11:45pm

It's now the time of night where some people start thinking about going to bed – you don't have that luxury. So, energised by a couple of Mars bars (we've themed the snacks, too) it's on to movie #3 – *Alien* – and some midnight scares.

Ridley Scott's 1979 commercial smash (although at the time it received mixed reviews) was always going to be on this list. Not only is the prequel currently exciting fanboys across the globe, this entry in the franchise is an unarguable classic, mixing the horror and science fiction genres to startling effect.

Scott is in his element here, armed with the concept art of HR Giger and the creature design of Carlo Rambaldi to craft a futuristic world that's downright eerie. Sigourney Weaver, meanwhile, heads a brilliantly-chosen cast as one of cinema's first female action stars. Some might prefer Scott's own *Blade Runner*, or James Cameron's gung-ho *Aliens* sequel, but, erm, we don't.

1:45am

Have a 15-minute break. Go to the toilet. Rest your eyes. Check you AVR isn't overheating.

2:00am

With Ripley's radio message still ringing in your ears, it's time to slow the pace down a touch and find some alien creatures that aren't set on ripping out your spine...

Steven Spielberg tends to look for the softer side in extra-terrestrials, so we're raiding his back catalogue for our fourth flick – no, not the sugar-coated schmaltz-fest that is *E.T.*, but the far superior *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Given a lavish Blu-ray release in 2009 by Sony Pictures, this is the definitive Spielberg HD platter until *Jaws* makes its belated debut on the format.



later this year. Slow-paced, but utterly absorbing, it's perfect middle-of-the-night fare – you can sink into your sofa and relax while Richard Dreyfuss' everyman builds his mashed-potato towers and heads off to meet the intergalactic interlopers, enveloped by first-rate picture quality and a good (but not quite superb) audio mix, in either Dolby TrueHD or DTS-HD MA flavours. Oh, and just so you know, we've opted for the 1998 Director's Cut, rather than the original or Special Edition iterations (all three are housed on the Blu-ray) – because, as the bearded director himself says, this is the 'final version'.

4:20am

Make a vat of coffee. You're going to need it.

4:30am

To bridge the gap between night and day we've selected a film that, to be honest, still works even if you grab a cheeky nap halfway through. After all, none of us are super-human.

Stanley Kubrick's **2001: A Space Odyssey** is regarded by some as the greatest science-fiction movie ever made. It's certainly one of the weirdest, with giant fetuses, feuding monkeys and self-serving computers all vying for screentime, accompanied by slices of classical music and minimalist dialogue. Our advice is to treat it as a work of surrealist art rather than a straightforward movie – or you might get angry.

Kubrick's outer-space epic can be snapped up on a region-free Blu-ray for a bargain price, and its 2.22:1 hi-def imagery is superb when you consider the film's 1960s origins. The multichannel LPCM mix (the Blu-ray was released in the format's early days) is less of a knockout – you don't get much in the rear channels – but at this time of the morning that might be for the best.

Giant of the genre:
Alien is still every bit as scary today as it was back in 1979



The Fifth Element:
also weird

7:00am

Right, enough dozing on the sofa, it's now halfway through our movie marathon and you need a film to focus the mind. Katsuhiro Otomo's 1988 manga adaptation **Akira** should do the trick.

Famed for bringing Japanese animation to a wider Western audience, **Akira** is an enthralling 124-minute journey into a scary future world packed with violent biker gangs, psionic powers and shady government organisations. Yep – *Toy Story* it ain't.

The hand-drawn visuals may not be a match for modern-day CG 'toons but the disc's 5.1 mix is among the best in the business – a 192kHz/24-bit TrueHD track (dubbed Hypersonic by the marketing department) that slices through your viewing room with astonishing clarity. You may not have heard anything like it. Okay, this is only on the Japanese language track so you'll be forced to read subtitles, but we said we wanted to focus your mind, didn't we?

9:05am

Breakfast time. Grab a bowl of Weetos Meteors and replenish your energy levels.

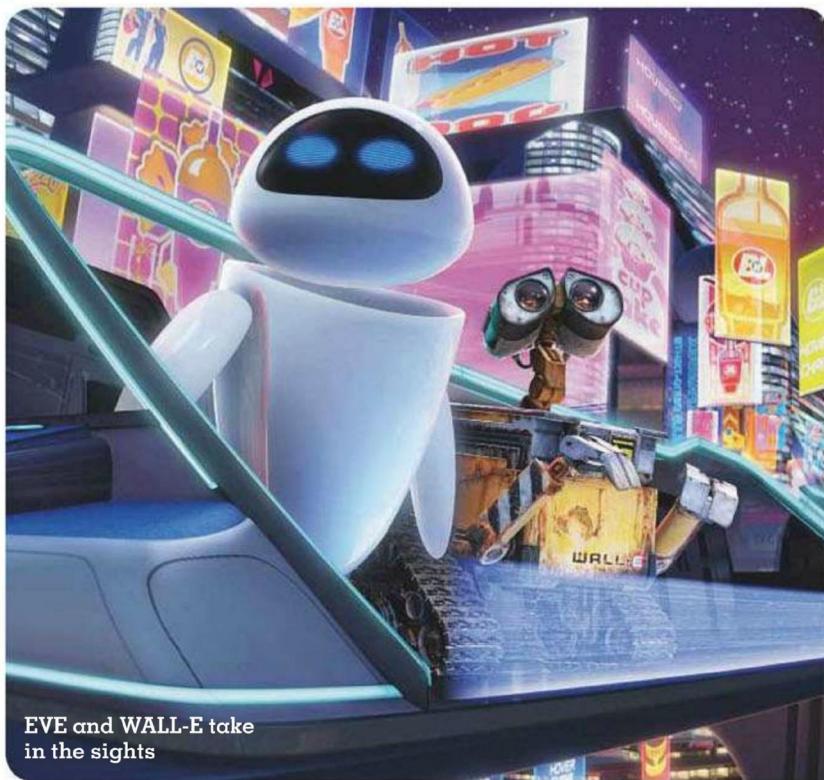
9:15am

There's a chance that you're now feeling a little bit hysterical, with a space-pummelled brain close to breaking point. As always, laughter is the best medicine, so our next platter is one of those rarest of beasts – a science-fiction comedy. This is a genre riddled with disasters (*Pluto Nash* springs to mind), but **The Fifth Element** stands out as a shining example of how to do it right.

This Bruce Willis vehicle doesn't strive for jokes to the detriment of its sci-fi origins (although Chris Tucker's superstar DJ comes close), and packs some glorious concepts – diddy cigarettes,

Space jam: *2001: A Space Odyssey* mixes cutting-edge effects with classical music





The discs

Don't already own these? Shame on you

Starship Troopers

Region-free. Walt Disney Home Entertainment. £10 approx

Star Trek

Region-free. Paramount Home Entertainment. £10 approx

Alien

Alien Anthology box set. Region B. 20th Century Fox. £20 approx

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

30th Anniversary Ed. Region-free. Sony Pictures. £20 approx

2001: A Space Odyssey

Region-free. Warner Home Video. £14 approx

Akira

Collector's Ed. Region B. Manga Entertainment. £20 approx

The Fifth Element

Region B. 20th Century Fox. £10 approx

Metropolis

Masters of Cinema Special ED. Region B. Eureka Entertainment. £15 approx

Wall-E

Region B. Walt Disney Home Entertainment. £20 approx

Avatar

Extended Collector's Ed. Region B. 20th Century Fox. £10 approx

a vertical city – alongside a memorable performance from Milla Jovovich as a scientifically created 'perfect being'. And as a home cinema experience it's rock-solid, too, providing you're not in ownership of the discontinued MPEG-2-encoded release that was rapidly replaced with a much-improved AVC-encoded transfer. Director Luc Besson's visual extravagances look suitably lavish and the soundtrack is a riot. We were using this movie as demo-fodder when it was on DVD, and nothing's changed now.

11:30am

Almost noon and, once again, we're changing pace, following the frantic brashness of *The Fifth Element* with something a little more cerebral, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

Made in 1927, *Metropolis* is, naturally, presented in black-and-white and 'silent', but don't let that put you off – if you're yet to sample its epic, sprawling narrative of a slave-labour-powered dystopian future (well, the year 2,000) then you're missing out.

The film has gone through countless iterations over the years, including a shortened 80-minute cut, complete with pop soundtrack, in 1984, but 2010 saw a new 150-minute restoration made from previously lost prints unearthed in Argentina and New Zealand, and it's this version that we've chosen here. Released by Eureka Entertainment as part of its Masters of Cinema catalogue, you even get a 56-page booklet to browse through. Purists can stick to the stereo soundtrack, but the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix isn't bad, either.

2:00pm

By now, concerned/irritated family members may be banging on the door of your viewing room, so the penultimate flick in our 24-hour binge is

something that has no doubt been described at some point as 'fun for all the family' – **WALL-E**.

Continuing the silent theme of *Metropolis* for its opening act, *WALL-E* is animation house Pixar at the top of its game – hilarious, emotional and smartly satirical. True, the robot design may owe a lot to Johnny 5 from *Short Circuit*, but everything else drips with originality.

WALL-E also shows that sci-fi lends itself to superior surround sound. Pixar's sonic experts have crafted a playful 5.1 mix (presented here in DTS-HD MA) rammed with tactile effects (check out the cockroach's delicious clicks) and seismic LFE when the situation calls for it. This is reference-grade audio – and the 1080p visuals are equally mesmerising.

3:40pm

A quick snack. Space Invaders on toast?

4:00pm

Congratulations! You've made it to the final film in our movie marathon. Have we saved the best 'til last? No. We've chosen **Avatar** instead (the best was shown at 11:45pm, surely?).

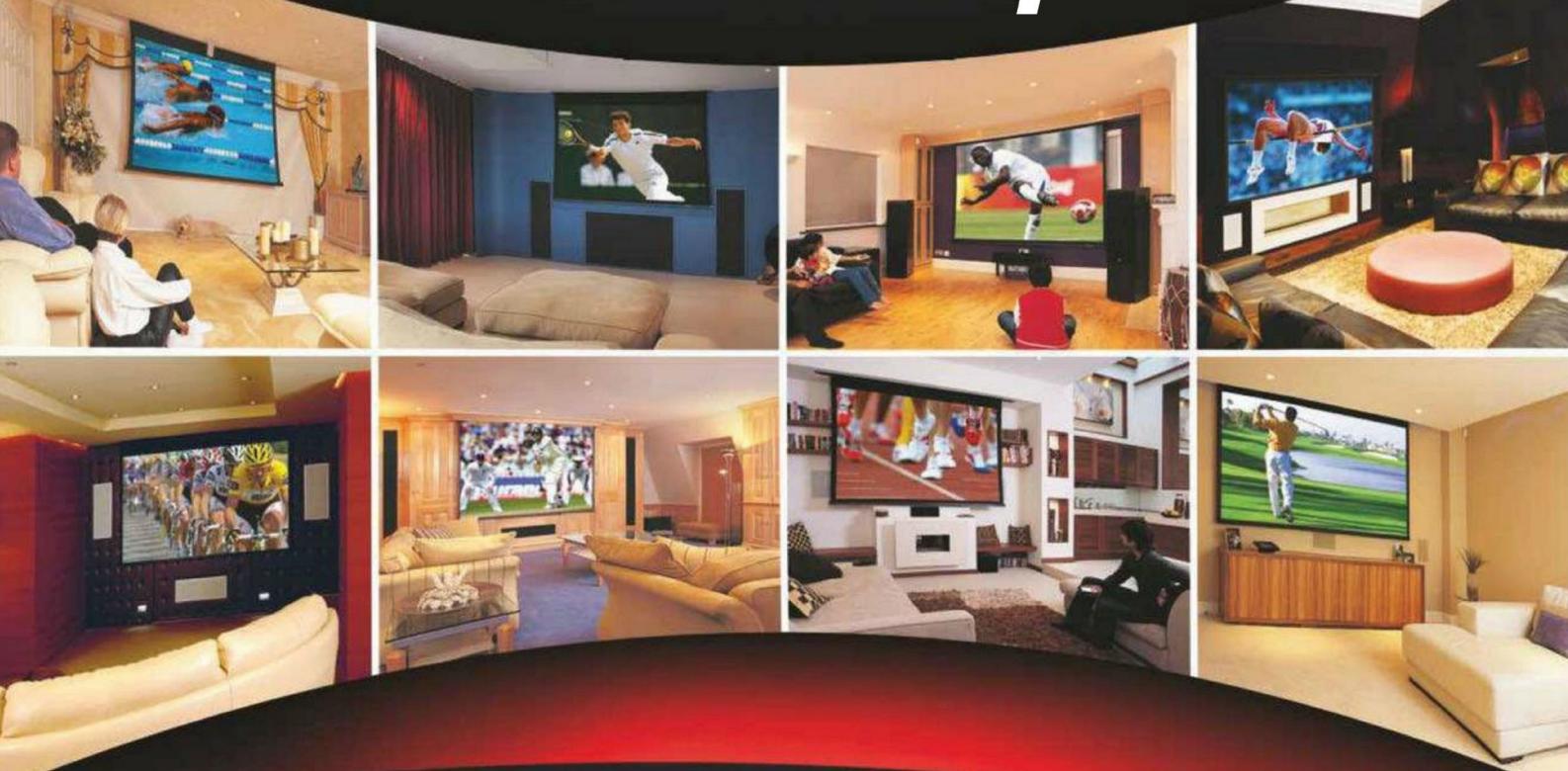
While we don't think James Cameron's blockbuster is the greatest sci-fi flick ever made, we're not going to argue with the AV experience that Fox's Blu-ray platter delivers (get the Extended Collector's Edition or you'll run 15 minutes short). There's little subtlety here, more a succession of demo-worthy set-pieces that provide a perfect climax to our day-long deluge. Ramp up the volume on your amp, sprawl on your sofa and enjoy. After all, if you've got this far, then you've earned it.

7:00pm

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The best seat in the house

Mark Craven reports on an HCC reader who saw a loft cinema and decided he had to have one too



The owner of this impressive loft-conversion remembers clearly the moment when he saw another dedicated attic install and thought 'I want one!'. Yet, unlike many of us, this wasn't a mere dream – within a few weeks the process of turning an almost unused space into home cinema heaven was under way.

As you may be able to tell from the accompanying images, this isn't a completely self-done conversion. The owner, a leading voiceover artist (cool!) who wishes to remain anonymous, was sane enough to call upon a loft-conversion specialist (Truss Loft in Yorkshire) to do the grunt work and RB Vision for the installation of the cabling and electronics. The former also had to find a way of providing access to the room, which meant constructing a whole new staircase. Something to bear in mind if you're planning your own project!

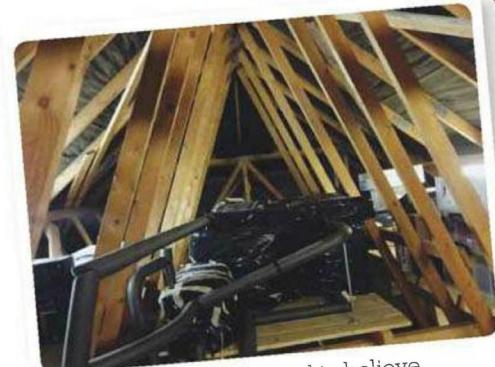
The system uses an Onkyo TX-NR1009 receiver (upgraded from a TX-SR609) in partnership with a seven-channel array of KEF CI in-wall and in-ceiling speakers. The subwoofer is now a Bowers & Wilkins DB1 (it was a Monitor Audio GXW15, and before that a B&W PVID – it's quite a long story). Video comes courtesy of a Panasonic DMP-BDT310 Blu-ray player, Samsung SMT-7800 Freesat receiver and a Sony PlayStation 3, fired onto the 110in projector screen by a Panasonic PT-AT5000E (meaning 3D is on the cards). Control of all the electronics is handled by DemoPad software on an Apple iPad, and a Rako lighting system helps set the scene. We particularly love the floor-level LED light strips.

Sofa so good

Like any installation, there were problems that had to be overcome. After eagerly awaiting delivery of the leather seating, our AV-Holic was left in turmoil when the two-part, 12-foot sofa was unable to fit up the staircase and into the room (luckily, the retailer replaced it without fuss with an easier-to-fit solution). And, once the room was finished, he also decided to re-paint the walls above and around the projector screen in a less-reflective dark grey. Other than that, though, we're told the only problem was 'knowing when enough was enough.'

Mr 'X' also has nothing but praise for his installer, RB Vision, and believes the cost of hiring professionals is completely

Luxury living: This top-of-the-house cinema room has been finished to a very high standard



Nothing to see here: Hard to believe considering the finished room, but this is what the loft used to look like



Early days: The first stages involved removing water tanks and support struts, and laying a proper floor

worth it. 'The prices I paid for the speakers, amp, Freesat box and projector, etc, were exactly the same as the lowest price I could find on the internet. It was clearly marked how much I was paying for the labour. Two guys were here all day for several days. If I had the time I would love to have set it up myself and saved a few quid but, truth is, I couldn't wait that long!'

There are some areas where money has been saved. Firstly, our voiceover guy decided against fitting acoustic plasterboard for sound-proofing. 'I nearly did,' he admits, 'but with so much Kingspan [insulation] and the quilt stuff which goes on top, we decided not to. It's a detached house so the neighbours don't hear anything.' Well, apart from the 'opening night' when a run-through of choice demo scenes with the AVR on its THX setting caused some >



Running games: Before all the walls are finished, the speaker, power and network cables are installed



Keeping warm: Converting a loft into a regularly-used room means making it comfy, so adding insulation was vital



Blank canvas: With the room finally beginning to take shape, it's time for the real fun to begin – fitting the AV



Hidden sound: The room uses KEF in-wall speakers, with the centre mounted behind the projector screen



Gone fishin': While waiting for the dedicated cinema seating, Mr 'X' had to make do with some camping chairs...

consternation in the neighbourhood. 'Three of the neighbours reported hearing gunshots and explosions at around 1.30am. Whoops. We don't listen that loud these days.'

Acoustic panels are also currently off the agenda. 'The cost was a bit more than we thought, so we decided we'd have a go until funds allow us to justify the expense. Some MDF, some foam and an electric staple gun (so much fun) – and my better-half with her Art degree happy to help. Has it made any difference? I have no idea.'

One aspect of the room that the owner decided couldn't be skimped on was picture calibration – 'if you are going to all the trouble to give yourself a great setup with amazing equipment and it delivers a great performance, why would you not book an expert to squeeze out that extra juice to create perfection?' he reasons. A 12-hour visit from the THX-certified staff at DisplayCalibration.co.uk did exactly that, particularly with regards to improving the black levels and shadow detailing from the Panny PJ.

Ready for action

With its mix of high-spec electronics, touchpanel control, subtle lighting and gorgeous interior, this is

a cinema room that anyone would be proud of – and it's certainly getting a lot of use.

Movie sessions take place around three or four times a week, from a growing collection of Blu-rays, DVDs, we're told, aren't allowed.

When he wants to demo the system's capabilities to friends, he's been using the opening sequence of *The Dark Knight*, the sandstorm scene from *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* ('it really shows off the 7.1 sound'), and *Blade Runner* to highlight the prowess of the DB1 subwoofer.

While the entire project was based on an impulse decision, this movie fanatic has no regrets. 'I am over the moon with it,' he says. 'I have wanted one for 10 years now and I can honestly say there is no need to ever go to the cinema ever again.' And that's the whole idea, isn't it? ●

Be in the mag!

Share your system

If you're currently building a cinema room, or have just finished one and are enjoying the benefits, we want to know about it! Get in touch via letters@homecinemachoice.com and share your experience. And, if you have good-quality pics of your project – be it a basement conversion or attic overhaul – you could be featured in HCC.



The LED strip-lighting is a perfect finishing touch

→ Equipment list

- KEF:** CI series in-wall and in-ceiling speakers
- Bowers & Wilkins:** DB1 subwoofer
- Sony:** PlayStation 3
- Samsung:** SMT-7800 Freesat receiver
- Panasonic:** PT-AT5000E Full HD 3D projector
- Panasonic:** DMP-BDT310 Blu-ray player
- Onkyo:** TX-NR1009 AV receiver
- Apple:** iPad with DemoPad control software
- Rako:** Integrated lighting

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Thanks to Sharp, **Mark Craven** discovers that his TV just isn't big enough – and that it might not cost as much as he thought to supersize his screen

Forget LG and its OLED screen, forget Toshiba and its glasses-free 3D TV, forget Samsung and its Smart fixation – the most exciting development in the TV market at the moment is from Sharp. Strange, but true.

The product in question is Sharp's forthcoming 80in LED TV, the snappily-titled LC-80LE632U. And what's so special about it? Really, not that much – apart from the screen size. It's 80in! Something that needs to be seen to appreciate. If you think a 55in panel is impressive, you'll soon need to think again.

For its biggest consumer TV yet, Sharp has dumped its Quattron quad-pixel tech, and eschewed local dimming of its LED backlighting system. It's done this to keep the price down. Sharp wants its super-size screen to be as affordable as possible (it's talking of a €5,500 launch tag), because it's committed to creating a new sector in the market. Basically, one where everyone buys a much bigger flatscreen than anyone previously thought sensible. This is the kind of thinking that I applaud.

Now, I know what you, or your family members, are saying – 'My TV is already too big for my living room!' Don't fret. Sharp has the research to prove such a statement is complete piffle.

Growth industry

Sharp's strategy is based, firstly, upon GfK data that shows the average size of TVs is growing, from less than 28in a few years ago to 32.5in in 2012. It is, of course, quite a jump from 32.5in to 80in, but this is where an additional study, conducted by the forward-thinking Japanese broadcaster NHK, comes in.

The crux of this boffinry is that for the most 'realistic sensation' when watching a TV – which, assumes NHK, is what we're all hankering for – it

needs to take up 30 degrees of your horizontal vision. Add this requirement to the average viewing distance of a UK living room – 2.7m apparently – and you arrive at an optimum screen size of 60-80in. I'm not quite sure why they can't say exactly what the size should be, but I'll let them off.

Immediately, this makes pretty much everyone else's TV lineups seem woefully inadequate – Sony's flagship Bravia, for instance, maxes out at 55in. Not good enough, says Sharp.

Back in my house I put Sharp's theory to the test. The distance from my sofa to the screen is 2.6m, and my regular display is 46in. According to the research, that's too small. And my eyes agree. **I could comfortably have a 70in panel in my room and, yes, my TV-watching experience would be all the better for it.** Sharp is trying to teach this particular grandmother to suck eggs.

So what's been stopping me getting a larger display? Well, firstly, my wife's insistence that our living room shouldn't look like a branch of Comet. Anything that's going to dominate a room to that extent will need to appear immaculate, classy, luxurious – and I'm not sure Sharp's new set fits that bill. But more importantly, it's the cost. Bang & Olufsen will happily sell you an 85in TV, but wants £66,000 in return.

This is the beauty of Sharp's new direction. Make 'em big, sell 'em cheap is, on the face of it, a simple idea, but one which no one else has yet truly embraced. My suggestion? Whip out the Freeview HD tuner, bin the speakers and don't bother with anything more than a single HDMI input – thus reducing the price even further and making super-size HD even more attainable.

Could you accommodate a larger TV in your setup? Let us know via letters@homecinemachoice.com

Mark Craven
generally sits 2.6m
from his TV
screen, unless he's
playing console
games, when he
likes to press his
face completely
up to the glass





FILM FANATIC

The Beek explores how mishandled marketing may have doomed Disney's sci-fi flop *John Carter* to failure before it even arrived on the cinema screen

What's in a name? As Juliet states in Shakespeare's best-known play, 'That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet'. Indeed it would. But when it comes to cinema it's a whole different board game – something I believe was ably demonstrated earlier this year by the performance of Disney's sci-fi epic *John Carter*.

Rumoured to have cost around \$250m to produce, *John Carter* fared spectacularly badly at the box office (domestically at least – the movie actually did quite well in several territories outside of the US). The poor returns even led Disney to blame *John Carter* for the \$84m loss incurred by its Studio Entertainment division in the financial quarter ending March 2012, and the subsequent resignation of Rich Ross, head of Walt Disney Studios.

Some commentators have put the film's dismal performance down to the mixed critical reaction it received from the press. As much as I'd love to believe that critics really have that much sway over the cinema audience, I don't. After all, millions of people still hand over piles of cash to watch blockbusters that have received much more of a drubbing than *John Carter* ever did (*Battleship*, for example). And there's also the fact that it's not a bad film. It's not a great one, either, but that's a subject for discussion in my review of the Blu-ray release over on p96.

Pulp fiction

For those of you unfamiliar with the source material, *John Carter* is based on the 'Barsoom' series of classic pulp sci-fi serials written by Tarzan creator Edgar Rice Burroughs. Collected into a series of eleven novels, published between 1917 and 1964, the stories have developed a giant fanbase and their inspiration can clearly be seen

in many subsequent sci-fi landmarks, including the *Star Wars* saga, *Avatar*, *Flash Gordon* and *Dune*. So what went wrong with the film adaptation?

Well, as far as I'm concerned the real blame for the film's box office failure can be placed at the feet of Disney's marketing department and the changes made to the movie's title.

John Carter is a terrible name for a film, because it doesn't tell you anything about it, nor generate any sense of excitement or curiosity. It's just a person's name – and not a very exciting one at that. **Would audiences have made *Die Hard* a hit if it had been called *John McClane* instead?** I doubt it.

Director Andrew Stanton has spoken about the change of title on several occasions, with the story seeming to alter a little each time. Essentially, it appears that nobody had much faith in naming the movie after the first novel – *A Princess of Mars* – due to worries that the word 'Princess' would put boys off going to see it. Because of this it was re-christened *John Carter of Mars* instead.

But, as we all know, the fun didn't stop there. The marketing department then got cold feet about the '...of Mars' thing. Thanks to the films *Ghosts of Mars*, *Mission to Mars*, *Mars Attacks!* and *Mars Needs Moms* there's a school of thought which believes any reference to Mars in a title is box office poison (which ignores the fact that most of those movies were stinkers...).

So what Disney ended up with was a self-fulfilling prophecy. *John Carter* flopped at the box office, and it was all down to the fact that it was set on Mars. And the fact it just happened to be saddled with the most inane and uninteresting title possible played absolutely no part in its epic failure whatsoever...

What other films were doomed to failure by poor marketing? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek
will be launching his own marketing campaign to prevent people confusing him with a judge from BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*



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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Want to comment on current technology? Need to share? **HCC** is here to help

The cable guy

I'm currently building a house and have the good luck to be able to have a home cinema in the basement. The room is approximately 5.5 metres long, 5 metres wide and 2.6 metres high.

I have been looking at a variety of equipment, with a total spend of around £6,000-£7,000.

One thing that I hadn't thought about, but would appreciate advice on, is the matter of connecting the kit to the ceiling-mounted projector. I haven't bought it yet, and the house is early enough to spec changes, but it occurred to me that there aren't many 10m HDMI cables. How do I then connect an HD

signal? Wirelessly? Cat6? Any help is much appreciated.

Brian, via email

First things first, Brian – if you're lucky enough to be building a dedicated room, and have the chance to run cables in-wall, then we'd suggest you do this rather than opt for wireless HDMI transmission straightaway. While there are many products available that do a solid job, such as Eminent's iTrio, you'll still need to hook up the sender and receiver. The former can just connect



simply to your AV receiver or Blu-ray player, but the latter will need to connect to your ceiling-mounted projector (requiring ceiling-mounting itself) and will need connecting to a power socket. That's a bit of a faff.

No wires:
Eminent's
iTrio streams
HD video



Also, the cost of a wireless HDMI sender is usually far greater than a cable solution.

You say that there aren't many 10m HDMI cables around, but do you really need a massive selection? Specialist cable manufacturers such as Profigold, Atlas, IXOS and Peerless all sell well-constructed HDMI cables at that length (well, the IXOS is 11m) with prices beginning from around £75. We've used a long-run Peerless cable in the past and had no complaints.

HDMI over Cat6 is another option, but it's more suited to longer cable runs – and again you'll need to buy a transmitter/receiver. www.hdcable.co.uk will sell you a simple, 1x1 system for £100.



Let me add to The Beek's list!

First point is

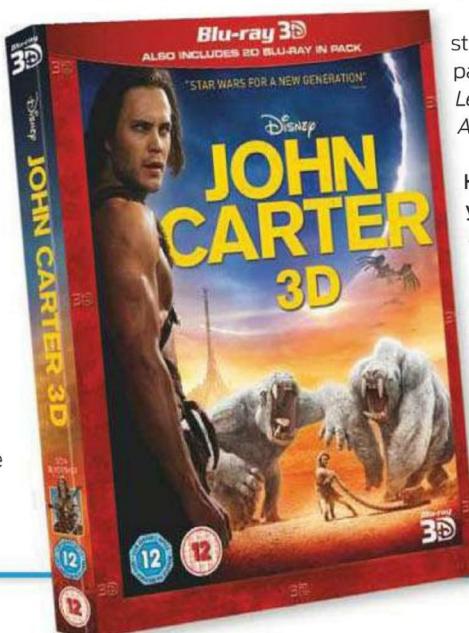
congratulations on producing what is, in my view, the best AV magazine on the market by some considerable margin – the combination of technical reviews and entertaining articles is second to none. Anyway, I am enjoying my new subscription to *Home Cinema Choice* over here in Australia and am compelled to write to also compliment you on the The Beek's column on p42 of HCC 208. I thoroughly agree that 2010 represented a high watermark for movies that fit into the category of providing refreshingly above-average levels of entertainment due to their combination of decent plot and engaging audio/visual effects. The X-factor that puts them well ahead of the pack!

The Beek mentions *Kick-Ass* and *Tron: Legacy* (both often receive re-plays in my home cinema) but I would also add *Iron Man 2* and *Book of Eli*. Both these 2010 movies present extremely well on modern Blu-ray-driven systems – the former provides excellent system demo segments whilst the latter delivers an exquisite twist. And I'm going to add a third from 2010: *The Town*, directed by Ben Affleck. It's a cracker of a movie, with good image/sound and a gripping story.

I have recently assembled my own home cinema system in a medium-sized dedicated room, consisting of an

Epson EH-TW9000, Denon DBP-2012, Denon AVR-3310 and B&W 684 5.1.

I am regularly stunned by the dynamic abilities of



this modern hardware and the striking delivery of sound and image from a system that could be assembled for approximately \$12,000.

Long live Blu-ray discs, strong Aussie dollars and paper magazines!

Lee Cunningham, Western Australia

Hi Lee. Well, we're glad you love Blu-ray discs and paper magazines, and your dedicated home cinema system sounds impressive at a cost of just \$12,000 'Aussie dollars'. As for your movie recommendations, thanks for flagging up both *Book of Eli* and *The Town*, two flicks that could have



Super 8: download from AcetraX or just buy the Blu-ray?

And to answer HCC reader Steve Old, who asked about running both a TV and a projector from his Onkyo receiver that has only one HDMI output – you can use a 1-in, 2-out HDMI splitter. Again, hd cable.co.uk offers a solution for around £40.

Downloads? Pah!

Re: your recent article about film downloads. I had a free voucher with my new television,

graced The Beek's list if he'd had more space. The former is a bit of an HCC fave – kind of like *The Road* only with martial arts and a smokin' hot brunette (Mila Kunis). Two things that would probably have made *The Road* more enjoyable. And *The Town* is proof that Ben Affleck is a very talented director – we're looking forward to his forthcoming CIA thriller *Argo*, which is due to arrive in cinemas in the UK this October.

Winner: Star Letter-writer Lee Cunningham wins a copy of the science-fiction blockbuster *John Carter 3D* on Blu-ray. It's available to buy from July 2, courtesy of Walt Disney Home Entertainment, priced around £28. It might take a while to get to him, though...

so I bought *Super 8* from AcetraX. After faffing about for ages I gave up and bought the disc for £5 (half the AcetraX price) – better quality and 5.1 surround sound!

John Ellison, via email

This is the reason why we're certain that physical discs will continue to exist alongside download/streaming services. The latter may be fine for those who favour convenience over quality, or who aren't bothered about assembling a movie library, but real enthusiasts will always cherish a tangible copy with superior AV quality.

Eagle eye

Your test of the lomega TV with Boxee was instructive as it showed a screengrab of the download of the film *The Dark Knight*, which managed to show a completely different cast to what was in the movie – but at least they managed to get the director right.

Ian Davies, via email

Well spotted, Ian. This is a perfect example of the Achilles' heel of metadata – at the end of the day, it's still based on a human being entering the correct information in the first place!

Save our sellers

This is a letter of two halves really. I don't normally write to magazines but feel strong in my opinion – that being certain

magazines always quoting the cheapest internet price on reviewed products, or stating 'if you shop online you can get it for as low as...' etc.

Now, I know times are tough for everyone and that any saving can sway a purchase, but these are also the people who are surprised and bemoan the closure of their local specialist. I myself work in retail, a Sony Centre, under which the franchise holder has been trading for 35 years and is still expanding, even in today's climate. I firmly believe that having a bricks and mortar place to view products, to talk to people who know the products and what would best suit the customer's needs (without being pushy, of course) is the only way to ensure that you are happy with the end result of your purchase. Also, buying locally from such a place gives you after-sales back up and assistance in the case of any problems or questions regarding operation.

I understand that retailers need to be competitive with online retailers, but to match their prices consistently (quite often below cost price) is not realistic, and it is that which is causing physical shops and specialists to close down all over the country. Let's not forget that a shop has overheads that don't affect the online retailers as much, and that the guys the consumers want to talk to for assistance need to be paid, too.

What would the average buyer feel if, after having purchased a bargain-priced TV on Amazon etc, he/she cannot get the wireless feature, for instance, to work? They phone their local store to find out that it has gone out of business. Where does this leave them? The answer is with a product that they are not getting the full potential of. We all need to be supporting our local independents to keep them in business.

Thankfully in your reviews you do quote the product at a realistic price that can be found on the high street, and for that I say, 'keep it up'!

Anyway, rant over, I also wish to ask your advice on a centre speaker. I am in the middle of re-vamping my home cinema. I have decided on a TV (Sony's KDL-46HX853) – I already have a Sony STR-DH820 & PS3. My front speakers are custom made (originally for audiophile use), and I've supplemented these with a pair of BK Gemini II subwoofers (two more to be added!). I now have the dilemma of choosing a centre speaker as it preferably has to be white. It seems like slim pickings out there! I don't have a set budget in mind but ideally it should be relative to the cost of the subs. Any suggestions? *Andy, via email*

Hi Andy. Without knowing much about your custom-made front left/right speakers, it's hard for us to accurately

recommend a centre speaker that will be voice-matched, or come close to it. However, in terms of white-finished centre channels, we'd suggest you check out Boston Acoustics' A225C, which we reviewed as part of the *HCC* award-winning A Series 5.1 array. This uses a pair of 5.25in woofers (made from ceramic and glass fibre polymer cones) and a 1in soft dome tweeter, and has a delicious, authoritative output.

Of course, to listen to one in action, you'll need to make your way to a dedicated bricks-and-mortar retailer – and this brings us to the first point of your letter. Basically, we agree completely that having local, independent retailers is key to home cinema enthusiasts getting the best possible advice when it comes to purchasing new hardware. Seeing and hearing a product in action is much more useful than just reading a review – we wouldn't expect anyone to spend what can sometimes be thousands of pounds without getting up close and personal to the kit.

Sometimes, however, we will highlight the discrepancies between suggested price points and what is available – recently, for example, the 60in Sharp TV (LC-60LE636E), which has a suggested price tag of £2,600 but can be snaffled both online (Amazon) and on the high street (Currys) for less than half the price. And then there was our *System Build* feature in a recent issue, where we showed how it was possible



Sharp's 60in LED – available for bargain prices

to assemble a TV/BD-player/AVR/speaker setup for under £1,000 if shopping around. But we never want to be in a situation where specialist AV dealers cease to exist. If that happened, we'd all be in serious trouble!

Fight club

Hi. Great mag – good reviews and other stuff.

I know this is just being picky but could you, at the start of every equipment review, have a box outlining what other equipment the product is being reviewed with? For instance, with an AVR, what is the source (Blu-ray, Freeview box) and what speakers are being used. Peter, via email

Super sonic: Super Audio CDs, such as *The Kinks' Celluloid Heroes* (left) are supported by many BD decks

Thanks for the input, Peter. We're always eager to hear from readers with suggestions, and this is one we'll definitely consider. An alternative may be an article explaining what each of our reviewers uses as their reference system.

SACD M.I.A. PT 1

I have been waiting with bated breath for an article trailed as 'coming next month' on Super Audio CDs. Are we going to see this?

Mark Vaughan, via email

SACD M.I.A. PT 2

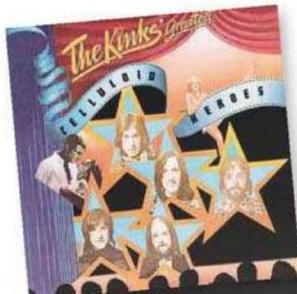
Can I ask when the article *Super Audio CD – The Format That Just Won't Die* will be published? This has been promised twice recently but still no sign – or have I missed it?

Also have you heard of anymore SACD/Blu-ray audio-only hybrid discs being

released? I only know of two, both Norwegian.
Mick Jennings, Hungerford

Mark and Mick, please accept our sincere apologies. We have indeed promised a feature on the longevity of the Super Audio CD format and its software highlights and not yet delivered it. Various reasons (waiting to receive information; new, must-review hardware arriving unexpectedly; lazy writers...) have all played their part. However, we can say with certainty that it will run in the next issue of *HCC*.

Regarding SACD/audio-only Blu-ray hybrid discs, the Norwegian releases Mick refers to are from the label 2L. It has now released more than just two of these curious platters (which feature both multichannel/stereo SACD DSD and DTS-HD MA discs) – check out the website www.2l.no to see the full catalogue.



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Ultra violence!

Crystal Acoustics' THX Ultra2-certified 5.2 array promises heavyweight surround sound.
See p74 for more...

HCC Ratings key

Outstanding	1 2 3 4 5
Above average	1 2 3 4 5
Acceptable	1 2 3 4 5
Disappointing	1 2 3 4 5
Dire	1 2 3 4 5

52 PANASONIC TX-P55VT50 → £3,100 Approx

The prince of darkness returns

CATCH
.44

See our BD review
of this star-
studded thriller
on p100



The TX-P55VT50 delivers a truly cinematic picture performance

Can Panasonic's latest flagship plasma TV possibly raise the picture quality bar once more? PDP-lover **John Archer** finds out

Despite Panasonic revealing a new-found enthusiasm for LED this year, most serious video enthusiasts will still be carrying a torch for the brand's new plasma TVs, particularly the flagship VT50 series auditioned here.

The P55VT50 makes an immediate impression by eschewing the bulky and frankly rather drab looks of many recent Panasonic TV generations in favour of a skinny, narrow-bezelled glass-and-metal design. What's more, its build quality wipes the floor with the flimsier bodywork of the latest 'size zero' LED models from LG and, especially, Samsung.

The P55VT50's connections are admirable, delivering four 3D-capable v1.4 HDMIIs, three USBs, an SD card slot, an Ethernet jack, a D-Sub PC port, built-in Bluetooth for keyboards and external audio devices. Wi-Fi is built in.

The P55VT50 is THX-certified for both 3D and 2D and endorsed by independent calibration gurus the Imaging Science Foundation (ISF), while at its heart is one of Panasonic's new NeoPlasma panels, complete with their far greater energy efficiency. However, since Panasonic now offers ultra-efficient LED TVs to cater for folk obsessed with A/A+ power ratings, the brand has made the brave but welcome decision to use its latest power efficiency to improve plasma brightness levels, even if this means 'only' bagging a 'C' energy rating.

The reasoning here is that many people still value picture quality from a TV above saving a few bob on electricity consumption. And I couldn't agree more.

Flagship facts

Before tucking into the P55VT50's picture performance, it's worth considering just what makes this set a flagship model. First, it uses a more advanced filter in its screen than models lower down the range – including the GT50s – to soak up more ambient light reflections and thus boost contrast.

Also important is the P55VT50's dual-core processing. The most

immediate benefit of this is multitasking, whereby you can have multiple apps and functions open simultaneously, for easy and rapid switching between them. But the extra power of the processors should also improve picture quality, boosting the speed and potency of Panasonic's video processing.

It may be on account of this that the P55VT50 delivers groundbreaking 2500Hz Subfield Drive technology, versus 2000Hz on Panasonic's cheaper ST50 series (and only 600Hz on the latest PDPs from LG and Samsung).

The P55VT50 also ships with two pairs of 3D glasses (while you don't get any with lesser Panasonic 3D models), and comes with a second remote control boasting a touchpad. A better control option, though, is Panasonic's Viera Remote app for Android and Apple devices, especially as it lets you share video content between the TV and your portable device.

The TV's picture quality is outstanding, with an extraordinary black level response being its single biggest attraction. Black tones during ultra-dark scenes, like Chapter 12 of *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows Pt 2*, just look black, with no greyness and none of the black level inconsistency that you get with LCD/LED TVs. Plasma's self-transmissive nature also means that, despite the intensity of the P55VT50's black colours, dark scenes continually contain far more shadow-detailing than you get with edge LED TVs.

This same ability to render the colour and brightness of separate pixels individually also means that dark colours retain outstanding tonal integrity, rather than being forced 'off-key' by the injection of any low-contrast greyness.

Also putting the P55VT50 in a class of its own when showing dark scenes is the way it can position bright, colourful picture elements right alongside pitch-black dark areas without compromising either.

More good news concerns the incredible amount of detail present in HD sources. Relatively static HD pictures benefit from an almost

Remote: Less cluttered than some of its rivals. You also get a touchpad controller

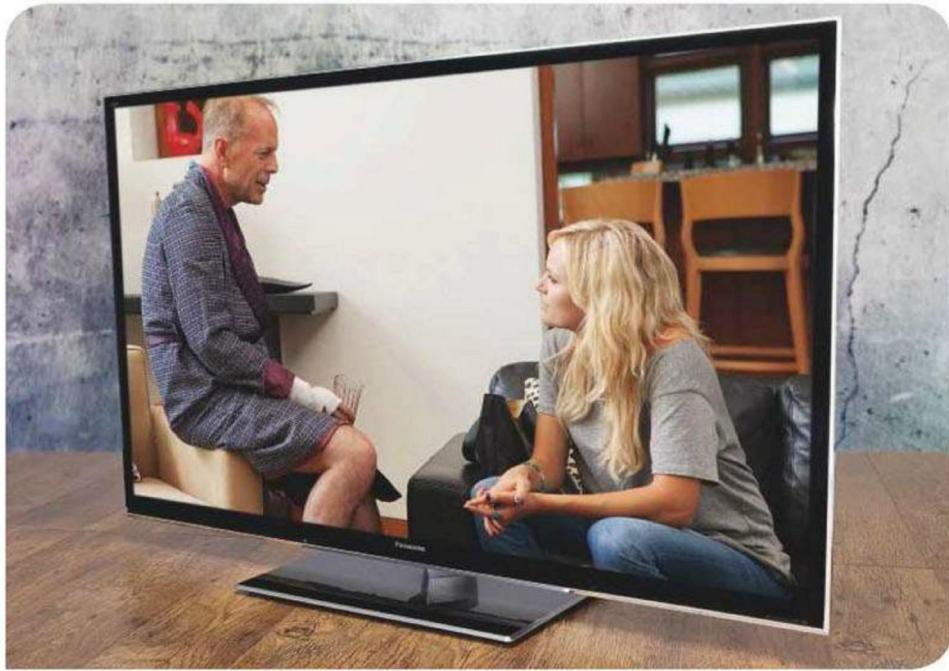


AV/CV

PRODUCT: 55in plasma TV with 3D and dual-core processing

POSITION: Panasonic's flagship range. A 65in version is available

PEERS: Samsung UE55ES8000; LG 55LM660T; Sony KDL-55HX853



New look:
Panasonic's plasma screens now have design flair to match their visuals

complete absence of noise from the P55VT50's rendering of HD inputs, while there's no motion blur at all. What's more, thanks to the sub-field drive improvements Panasonic has introduced, judder is vastly less problematic than it has been on past plasma screens.

Some mesmerising colour accuracy, meanwhile, delivers blends and skintones with so much consistency and precision that there's hardly any of plasma's once-common striping issues.

'Picture quality is superb, with an extraordinary black level response the main attraction'

Also notable is how punchy and wide-ranging colours look by the technology's standards.

Despite the P55VT50's extra brightness and colour punch, it's still undeniable that its images don't look as bright and rich as those of most top-level LED TVs if you're watching in a very bright room environment. The difference is markedly less pronounced than it has been in the past, though, and the P55VT50's positioning as an enthusiast's display makes it more likely that owners will dim the lights for viewing sessions.

Powerful 3D

The P55VT50 is also a terrific 3D performer. The extra power efficiencies Panasonic has delivered are used to output 3D with much

more brightness and punchier, more natural colours than has been possible on previous generations. The extra punch to the P55VT50's 3D pictures helps images seem sharper and crisper too, as well as enabling the screen to deliver a more effective sense of depth.

Perhaps the single best thing about the P55VT50's 3D images, though, is that they're almost completely free of crosstalk ghosting, to an extent almost all Active 3D LED TVs (including Panasonic's own models) can only dream about, although despite offering the brand's brightest 3D plasma images yet, the P55VT50's stereoscopic visuals can't match those of most LED TVs in this regard, especially Passive models.

Another small, general image issue is low-level dotting noise over skin tones during fast camera pans or when people move swiftly across the screen. Although this is barely noticeable from a sensible viewing distance. Audio performance, meanwhile, doesn't scale the exceptional heights of the visuals. Despite the robustness of the TV's frame there's no great sense of bass profundity, and the dynamic range isn't particularly superior to that of other flatscreens.

With Panasonic's own ST50 plasma and Sony's HX853 LED TV offering impressive bigscreen thrills for much less money, the P55VT50 won't be for everyone. But if you're as serious about films as we think you are and can afford the TV's asking price, then you can rest assured you're getting the cream of the crop.

→Analysis



GUI: The Viera Connect menu still features large icons and a back/forward navigation system that might not suit everyone's tastes

Killer feature: Plasma's black level and motion strengths are in full effect here – the P55VT50 delivers a cinematic video performance

→Specifications

3D: yes Active Shutter with two pairs of glasses supplied

Full HD: yes 1,920 x 1,080

Tuner: Freeview HD and Freesat HD

Connections: 4 x HDMI; component; 3 x USB; SD card input; composite; D-Sub PC port; digital audio output; Ethernet

Smart TV: yes Viera Connect portal

Sound: N/A

Brightness (claimed): N/A

Contrast ratio (claimed): 6,000,000:1

Dimensions: 1296(w) x 771(h) x 50(d)mm

Weight: 31.5kg

Features: One-sheet design, THX certification; ISF endorsement; 2500Hz focused Subfield drive; Infinite Black Ultra panel design; NeoPlasma panel construction; built-in web browser; Bluetooth keyboard and speaker support; Android/Apple device control system with video 'throwing'; voice control options; trackpad remote included as standard; dual-core processing; multitasking multimedia support



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic P55VT50 → £3,100 Approx

→ Supplier: www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

Highs: Sensational picture quality in 2D and 3D mode; excellent build quality and design

Lows: It's pretty expensive; pictures aren't as bright in light conditions as LED TVs

Performance:

Design:

Features:

Overall:

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BD goes Quad HD

Sony's newest Blu-ray hides its technology in plain sight. **Steve May** gets beneath the skin of the extraordinary BDP-S790

The latest flagship in Sony's Blu-ray player fleet is surprisingly self-effacing. It's priced at just over 200 notes and has a relatively generic design (slim, black, gently curved in places), yet it packs a forward-looking feature set that few players at any price point can match. After several hours of use, I found myself looking for a catch. Is the BDP-S790 player really the rock-solid, gold-plated bargain it first appears to be?

Connectivity is certainly a cut above, with a pair of HDMI outputs provided. Users can choose to use the second HDMI to deliver lossless audio only to a pre-HDMI v1.4 AV

receiver, with the prime output free to carry 3D to a compatible display (Sony calls this AV Separation mode); alternatively you can opt for a mirror configuration, perhaps to feed both a TV and projector, or TV and wireless HDMI transmitter.

The player also offers two USB inputs, one on the front fascia, the other stashed away on the rear. As there's no persistent memory onboard, you'll need to use the latter for a 1GB USB stick if you're planning to play with BD-Live. If this isn't on the cards, you can turn it over to a Skype camera.

The deck's cosmetic finish is a rather unusual streaky dark-grey, and

AV/CV

PRODUCT:
4K-capable 3D net-connected Blu-ray player

POSITION:
Technically the most advanced player in Sony's standalone Blu-ray range

PEERS:
Panasonic DMP-BDT320, Samsung BD-D7500

it's topped off with soft-touch controls on the lid. Rear connectivity includes digital and coaxial optical outputs, legacy phono and Ethernet (although Wi-Fi is onboard).

Geek it up

Where this player really gets interesting is underneath the lid – the BDP-S790 can process a video input every which way, including up to 4K resolution, something which no other BD deck on the planet can do.

The good news is you don't need to be a science geek to sort it all out. Just set the player on Auto and let it decide just how best to juggle the 13 parameters available.



The slimline BDP-S790 offers heavyweight AV features

IPTV provision is similarly generous. There's a huge variety of streaming services available from the connected Sony Entertainment Network. The latest iteration of the BBC iPlayer looks exceptionally slick and the newest leanback YouTube API is a definite improvement over past editions – however, less glamorous services look a little tired. Unlike the jazzed-up user interface found on Sony's 2012 TVs, the Blu-ray line-up still employs the brand's XrossMediaBar, which is starting to wilt under the sheer weight of catch-up and VOD on offer. Not yet checked out Crackle? If you want to watch anime (such as *Samurai X*) and ageing films (like *The China Syndrome*) for free, you should do.

If, on the other hand, you prefer to view your own content, then you're in luck. Network file support is top-class. Across a LAN, the BDP-S790 happily plays MKV and AVI files (amongst many others), and compatibility from USB is just as wide. Streamed footage looks good, too. A new processing package, IP Content Noise Reduction Pro, goes some way to smoothing the horrendous jaggies and detail

deficit frequently found on low-bitrate content.

Other DLNA trickery includes Catch and Throw. Got a photo on your tablet or smartphone you want to share? Literally swipe it toward the BD deck, which will then display it full-size. Also provided is a basic web browser, but this lacks Flash support and text input – and navigation via the remote is a chore.

Performance breakdown

Disc-loading speeds are no more than average for this class of kit. My Java-heavy test disc, *Goldfinger*, went from tray-in to menu screen in 53 seconds; a lightweight concert platter also took a tardy 39 seconds.

However, once loaded, the player's pictures are unrelentingly sharp and wonderfully smooth. The deck interpolates the 8-bit colour found on DVD and Blu-ray to 16-bit resolution; of course your panel can't handle 16-bit colour, but that's a moot point. What you see is ultra-smooth gradations courtesy of Sony's Super Bit Mapping optimiser.

Colour fidelity is excellent. Even the candy-hued chaos of The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* doesn't seem overly amped. Images have real

dynamic pop, too, thanks to some judicious contrast compensation.

The BDP-S790 tries hard to replicate the clarity of hi-def sources with standard-def content. Deinterlacing is phenomenally good, and jaggy torture discs effortlessly defeated – the fluttering flag on HQV's SD test disc is rendered silky smooth. Taking the credit for this is Sony's Super Resolution enhancer, which manages to sharpen delineation without creating obvious edge enhancement. I suspect those with a bountiful legacy disc collection will not feel any screaming urgency to upgrade their software with Blu-rays once they take this puppy for a walk.

Ready and waiting

The BDP-S790's 4K upscaling talents will have to pass unjudged. We very nearly managed to get this player's delivery to coincide with a visiting Sony 4K VPL-VW1000ES projector, but ultimately schedules conspired against us. We could have called in Toshiba's 4K (3840 x 2160) ZL2 TV (reviewed on page 20), but that screen doesn't accept a 4K image via HDMI. All I can tell you with certainty is that native 4K digital





AV separation: The two HDMI's allow audio and video to be output separately – handy for those with non-HDMI v1.4, or 4K-capable, receivers

still images are output without any conversion.

Of course, given that 4K displays upscale incoming content to fit, the value of having a 4K upscaler in a Blu-ray player is somewhat dubious. I suspect what we really have here is Sony quietly seeding the market with 4K-capable hardware, prior to a super hi-res screen launch in late 2013; at that point it will be advantageous to have a healthy number of consumers with random 4K in the wild.

Depth charge

As part of the deck's 3D compatibility, there's related dimensional functionality in the shape of a new universal 3D

'There's no doubting that the BDP-S790 is ludicrously good value – video performance is peerless'

conversion algorithm. This, for those who really can't get enough of those funny glasses, can be used to depth-convert anything. It works surprisingly well but I struggle to see the point. If something wasn't made to be seen in 3D, why would anyone choose to watch it that way?

Sonically, the BDP-S790 is a star. Multichannel Super Audio CD played as DSD direct into a compliant AVR is epic. It may be ploughing a lonely furrow with its support of SACD in this section of the market, but I appreciate Sony's commitment. Spatial imaging is first-class, encouraging me to rate the deck as an above-average audio source. Sony's engineers have drafted in a beefed-up power supply IC and capacitor for the job.

With DTS-HD Master Audio and Dolby TrueHD sources, the player doesn't miss a note. The DTS-HD MA soundtrack to *Yellow Submarine* (output as PCM) sounds positively sumptuous, with submarine musicality and depth.

The BDP-S790 ships with a simple, elegant remote control. This player's closest rival is Panasonic's DMP-BDT320 – a similarly adept performer, cursed with an inelegant touchpad controller. Handsets aside, choosing between the two is no easy task. Even if you bench Sony's 4K talents (as its value is impossible to assess) the two are very evenly matched, with video performance tied. For some buyers the BDP-S790 will gain an edge through its SACD compatibility, but the Panasonic wins when it comes to the quality of its CD replay.

Conclusion

There's no doubting that the BDP-S790 is ludicrously good value. Video performance with Blu-ray and DVD is peerless, and its sonic chops are not to be sniffed at. But the player does have an Achilles' heel: build quality. The advanced electronics deserve more than the flimsy, lightweight chassis they've been bundled into. The BDP-S790's half-depth form factor may be standard for mass-market Blu-ray players, but that doesn't excuse its lightweight, resonant façade. During my audition, the deck thrummed impolitely and the disc transport could be heard grumbling. Of course, decent bodywork would almost certainly double the cost, but it's a point worth making.

Still, for around £240, you really can't complain. Overall, this is an exceptionally desirable piece of kit. I expect it to sell like hot cakes.

→Analysis



GUI: Owners of other Sony AV hardware will be familiar with the XMB-toting interface, which is beginning to struggle under the weight of features. Delve into the setup options to be teased by the 4K output option

Killer feature: The BDP-S790's SD upscaling is very good, making it a great choice for those with large DVD collections

→Specifications

3D: YES

Upscaling: YES to 1080p and 4K (4096 x 2048)

Multiregion: NO Region B BD/R2 DVD

HDMI: YES 2 x HDMI v1.4a

Component: NO

Multichannel analogue: NO

Digital audio: YES optical and coaxial digital audio outputs

Ethernet: YES

Built in Wi-Fi: YES

SACD/DVD-A: YES/NO

Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD decoding: YES/YES

Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD bitstream: YES/YES

Dimensions: 430(w) x 42(h)

x 193(d)mm

Weight: 1.9kg

Features: Digital Cinema 4K upscaling; DSD output; USB x 2; Sony Entertainment Network, featuring BBC iPlayer, Demand 5, Netflix, YouTube, Dailymotion, Facebook, Twitter and more; DLNA multimedia media playback (AVCHD, MPEG2, DivX, AVI, MKV, MP3, WAV, JPEG/MPO)



HCC VERDICT

Sony BDP-S790 → £240 Approx

→ Supplier: www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 324 7129

Highs: Powerful AV performance, with good SD upscaling; excellent IPTV selection; wide multimedia file support

Lows: Lightweight build quality; Xross Media Bar is a clunky way to navigate the Sony Entertainment Network

Performance:

Design:

Features:

Overall:



Key Features

- The newest Sigma Designs 8642 media processor: enjoy excellent playback and performance of interactive features.
- **Blu-ray and DVD player:** play Blu-rays and DVDs (plus Audio CD and data discs with video/music/photo files).
- **HDD player:** connect an HDD to the player and play content directly from the HDD.
- **Network player:** connect the player to a local network and play content directly from PC or NAS (UPnP, SMB, NFS).
- **MKV player:** play HD and SD video in a popular MKV format and other modern video file formats, including top quality HD video with very high bitrate.
- **RealD:** watch 3D video in this ultra modern format used in cinema for the latest movies.
- **HD audio:** enjoy top-quality audio tracks (Dolby True HD, DTS HD Master Audio, LPCM, FLAC).
- **3 USB ports:** conveniently connect HDDs, USB flash drives, USB card readers and other USB storage devices.
- **HDD rack with hot swap function:** easily and quickly insert and exchange internal 3.5" SATA HDD.
- **SD card slot:** easily play media files on SD memory cards from your camera or other devices, or use an SD memory card as a local or system storage (required for BD Live function).
- **HDMI 1.3:** ensure the best possible quality of HD video and HD audio.
- **A rich set of standard A/V connectors:** use S/PDIF optical audio, stereo audio, component video, composite video outputs to easily connect any A/V equipment.
- **Extended support for Dolby True HD and DTS HD Master Audio:** output bitstream (up to 7.1 channels) or decode to LPCM (up to 7.1 channels) for maximum flexibility when connecting audio equipment, and for extended support of advanced playback features (such as Picture-in-Picture).
- **Video output flexibility:** output video in any resolution and format (from SD to 1080p, 24p/PAL/NTSC).
- **Upscaling:** high quality upscaling of DVD and any other SD video content to Full HD (1080p) or other HD resolution.
- **File browser:** convenient file browser with powerful file management (copy, move, delete, rename, organize, sort).

£369
inc VAT &
delivery

Sonic simplicity

This successor to Audiolab's 8000AP gives **Richard Stevenson** a glimpse of an altogether more straightforward approach to home cinema hardware

If you enjoy spending as much time fiddling and tweaking your home cinema system as you do watching movies, you might want to skip this review. For what we have here is the latest version of Audiolab's stripped-down AV processor that puts almost its entire R&D spend into audiophile components rather than features. In fact, there isn't any video processing under that stylish aluminium case at all, so even the term 'AV processor' is a bit remiss. What you do get is a tuned and upgraded 8000AP, which we liked a lot, now with v1.4 HDMI pass-through switching.

Imagine, if you will, the features list of a typical, say £600, AV receiver. Well, the Audiolab hasn't got any of that. No networking, EQ, auto setup, scaling, height or width channels, GUI or multizone abilities. It doesn't even have any AV inputs outside of the four HDMI ports. Still not bothered? Well how about the 8200AP not offering Dolby TrueHD or DTS-HD MA processing on board? Audiolab says this processor eschews frivolous bells and whistles, but is that taking it a step too far?

Actually, probably not. If you are in the market for nearly £1,300 worth of AV processor then it is a pretty safe

bet that you will spend a fair bit of cash on a top-spec BD player. Nearly all Blu-ray decks can decode Dolby and DTS formats to linear PCM output over HDMI, or even analogue outputs, and the best players, such as the Oppo BDP-95EU, do that very well indeed. You might regard duplicating that functionality in the processor as a waste of money.

Fed an LPCM signal over HDMI, the Audiolab routes the datastream to its high-spec Cirrus Logic dual DSPs and on to a suite of eight 24-bit/192kHz delta-sigma D-A convertors. There is a proprietary clocking system to reduce jitter on

AV/CV

PRODUCT:
Affordable audiophile AV processor

POSITION:
Audiolab's only AV processor

PEERS:
Marantz AV7005



the HDMI input, which claims to do so by a factor of 30.

When given a multichannel analogue input all this digital wizardry is bypassed completely, essentially making the 8200AP an eight-channel analogue pre-amp – although you can tie the bypass analogue inputs with HDMI switching for video. Four-layer PCBs, a toroidal transformer and no less than 14 regulated power supplies are pure hi-fi territory, as is the fast/slow DAC filter settings and upsampling of basic 44kHz S/PDIF inputs. Other upgrades over the old 8000AP include 12V triggers, S/PDIF outputs from all sources and a very crisp OLED display.

There is another huge benefit to Audiolab's bare-bones approach – simplicity. Speaking as a man who spends half his life fathoming new arrays of AV features and working out how to get the best from them, simplicity has a lot of appeal. Most Saturday nights I am frantically trying to re-connect and setup my own heinously complex AV system, striving to work out why I am getting no dialogue from a height channel, while my wife sits on the sofa

tapping her fingers impatiently. The Audiolab is a beautiful tonic to that.

Getting started

The setup process is a little fiddlier than sticking a mic in the listening position and wandering off for a cuppa, but it doesn't take long. You can do this via basic onscreen menus if you have a composite video connection in place – the 8200AP does not overlay the menu on the HDMI picture. Thankfully, it is just as easy to use the front menu Q(Quick) Set function, which runs through all the basic speaker parameters and delays in sequence. You will need a dB meter to set channel levels with absolute accuracy but doing it by ear and tweaking as required during a movie is a good second choice. And note that you will need a phono connection to a display device for input renaming, setting up triggers, switching AC filters, etc.

The remote control is right out of the same simple-yet-effective school of design and works a treat, although it's a long way from the sophistication of app-based remotes.

There are other features I miss on the 8200AP, not least of which is

HDMI's auto lip-sync feature. Manually getting lip-sync correct has always been a pain and the 8200AP's rather coarse 10ms incremental jumps don't help. Another niggle is that the volume control on the remote doesn't accelerate, making big volume swings a lengthy procedure. Hardly massive issues, I think you will agree.

Clean sound

I fondly remember the old 8000AP. It was a fabulously clean-sounding processor with a noise floor so low it was in the basement. Clearly the 8200AP is an evolution of that design as these very same characteristics impress from the outset. Comparing my notes, the new kid on the block seems to have developed a little more pace and richness, too, packing an even bigger and more fulsome punch that its predecessor. With both LPCM and analogue multichannel inputs the overall performance will also depend on the player, but the same can be said of an amplifier/speaker partnership. In the spirit of investigation I tried the Cambridge Audio BD751, Oppo BDP-95EU and >





Sign of the times:
Audiolab now specs 3D-capable v1.4 HDMI's

Denon DVD-A1UD in both LPCM over HDMI and analogue mode, and each setup had its own strengths and very few weaknesses.

The 8200AP delivers a uniformly polished sound that is crisp and quick yet lacking nothing in sheer weight. This is the sort of performance that leaves you forgetting about the system itself and enjoying your music and movies – smooth and refined at the top end with a fabulous dynamic range that begs you to go large with the volume control.

While I would not chuck any of the aforementioned setup combinations out on a rainy night, the Oppo and Audiolab seem to work a real magic

'The Audiolab delivers a polished sound – crisp and quick yet lacking nothing in sheer weight'

together. Running multichannel over LPCM and stereo over analogue, the 8200AP offers serious high-end fidelity at a relatively affordable price.

Yee-haw!

The opening sequence to the surprisingly watchable *Cowboys & Aliens* looks like a homage to Sergio Leone with hint of SF mystery, and the Audiolab paints the scene with suitably moody precision. Daniel Craig's brief but explosive fight with the three outlaws has a lightning-fast pace and each blow is delivered with a tangible sonic force.

In the movie's epic, clichéd final battle, the Audiolab unleashes the full force of the all-channel surround sound with integrity and passion. The top end never gets feisty or out of

hand, even with the volume pushed hard, and there's a wonderful, enveloping cohesiveness. One glitch did rear its head, though – despite having set all channels with a dB meter during setup, the subwoofer still proved to be about 10dB too hot in reality. It's an easy adjustment using your sub's volume control but I can't help thinking there's a bug in the channel-level settings somewhere.

Switch to stereo music and the Audiolab delivers an equally rich sound that is right up there with dedicated stereo pre-amps. Its refined character is a great complement to the Oppo's slightly harder edge, resulting in a spacious and well-balanced presentation that easily passes muster as true high-fidelity. Of course, this performance will only be realised with suitably polished power amplification – Audiolab's own 7x100W 8200X7 is a neat cosmetic match that you might want to consider.

Audiophile bargain

If you are familiar with current-spec AV receivers then the 8200AP takes a little while to get your head around. The lack of features common to even the most basic AVRs, the copious quirks and even the cosmetics could put many off – until they hear it least. Married to high-quality power amplification, the Audiolab is a fabulous performer, and its refreshing simplicity is an absolute joy. Rather like the high-end Bryston SP3, I could easily live with the 8200AP for its exceptional sound quality and an altogether less complex life. As the Audiolab achieves this heady combination at a tenth of the price of the Bryston it can only be considered an audiophile bargain.

→Analysis

GUI: You'll need to connect the Audiolab to your display via its composite video output (labelled OSD) to see basic onscreen menus – although setup can be done via the front-panel OLED display

Killer feature: The 8200AP strips sound processing down to the bare essentials – it's astonishingly simple to get to grips with

→Specifications

Dolby TrueHD: No shocker!
DTS-HD Master Audio: No double shocker!

Multichannel input: Yes 7.1-channel
Amplification: No processor only

Multiroom: No

HDMI: Yes 4-in 1-out v1.4

Additional connections: 3 x coaxial digital audio; 4 x optical digital audio; 5 x phono analogue inputs; 8 x phono analogue inputs (7.1 bypass); 1 x composite output for OSD

Dimensions: 445(w) x 335(d)
x 75(h) mm

Weight: 5.75kg

Features: Audiophile-quality construction and components; 12V triggers; RS232 CI control; 10ms lip-sync adjustment; Cirrus Logic dual DSPs; eight 24-bit/192kHz delta-sigma D-A convertors; Direct Mode; jitter reduction circuit; OLED front panel display



HCC VERDICT

Audiolab 8200AP → £1,300 Approx
→ Supplier: www.iagggroup.com
→ Tel: 01480 447700

Highs: Clean and rich sound; superb dynamics; simple to use; affordable

Lows: Complete dearth of features; quirky setup; needs partnering with a good power amp

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

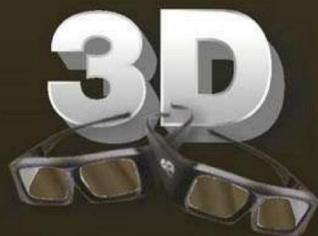
Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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64 SAMSUNG PS51ES8000 → Approx £1,700



HOT FUZZ!

The Muppets are back! See our BD review on p105

Active 3D ain't dead yet

Adrian Justins auditioned Samsung's range-topping 51in 3D plasma and ended up watching far more *Monsters vs Aliens* on 3D Blu-ray than he ever thought possible

AV/CV

PRODUCT: 51in Active 3D plasma TV with Smart features

POSITION: Samsung's premier 51in 8000 series plasma

PEERS: Panasonic P50ST50; LG 50PM970T

It's almost impossible to start a plasma TV review without first mentioning the L word. In other words, the seemingly relentless march of LED into the showrooms and living rooms of the nation. If plasma was only just being invented it probably wouldn't reach production, but thankfully for discerning AV enthusiasts, Samsung, LG and Panasonic have long-established factories that continue to keep cooking on gas.

So, up against rival-brand plasmas and Samsung's own LEDs, does the Samsung PS51ES8000 deliver the home cinema goods?

Catwalk catchup

The set's design is hardly fashion-forward, ironically reminding me of the sort of thing Panasonic was doing a couple of years ago with an inch-wide grey bezel. But it's inoffensive, even managing to camouflage its built-in Skype camera along the top edge of the frame. The Black Pro panel itself is nice and dark with fairly low reflectivity, but the connections are below standard – it lacks a headphone jack and has an HDMI count of three, rather than four.

In terms of tech the PS51ES8000 isn't the most revolutionary of screens, but it does share the dual-core processor of the brand's upmarket LED sets. This should facilitate quicker operation and deliver superior images. Certainly, the cursor absolutely whizzes around the attractive Freeview EPG.

Wide boy: The PS51ES8000 features a larger bezel than Samsung's LED models

Remotes: Like Panasonic, Samsung now ships a pair of remotes with its high-end plasma

Samsung gives buyers every opportunity of extracting the best possible pictures from the PS51ES8000. Diverse calibration options include monotone and colour expert patterns that allow you to optimise the panel. Nearly every aspect of the picture can be fine-tuned but it's a pity you can't save any presets to the picture mode options to suit different sources or viewing times. The list of default presets is comprised of just four modes – Standard, Dynamic, Movie and the curious-sounding Relax (unavailable during 3D viewing).

The set comes with two pairs of Active 3D specs. They're almost a match for Passive 3D glasses in terms of simplicity and comfort, and, of course, deliver an improved visual experience. Pixel-freaks will appreciate the Full HD resolution with 3D Blu-rays, and there's very little crosstalk (and definitely less than found on the brand's LED sets). *Monsters Vs Aliens* in 3D feels punchy and vibrant, with just about no noise, and a real sense of depth to scenes that sometimes feel flat. I would suggest, however, considering the PS51ES8000's Dynamic viewing mode when watching 3D, albeit in a trade-off for less shadow detail. Changing the 3D perspective is also an option, but I couldn't get it to improve the 3D effect at all – it just introduced more crosstalk. Avoid.

The PS51ES8000's picture strengths remain consistent when watching 2D Blu-rays. Some will argue that there's never been a screen to hold a candle to the memory of Pioneer's Kuro but the deep, uniform black levels on this Samsung plasma and zero backlight





Remember your settings:

Calibration options are solid, but the screen lacks user-definable presets

leakage are enough to make an LED screen weep.

A lack of brightness does mean the clarity of *Avatar* on Blu-ray isn't quite as impactful as on a similar-sized LED screen, but what you have here is a more natural viewing experience. Of course, if you want impact you can select the Dynamic mode. If you're mad.

No Country For Old Men on BD proves the suitability of Movie mode for daytime viewing, after a slight boost to both brightness and sharpness. I found best results also

'Pixel-freaks will appreciate the Full HD resolution with 3D Blu-rays, and there's very little crosstalk'

came when setting the dynamic contrast to medium, black tone to darkest and gamma to -2. In other words, you do need to tinker in order to get the most from this display. Colours are accurate and flesh tones realistic, with minimal blotchiness and banding.

Another vital area in which the screen excels is its handling of movement, thanks to the excellent implementation of 600Hz sub-field processing. As the helicopter in *Avatar* flies over Pandora, past flocks of strange birds, there's a wonderful smoothness to the action. Likewise, the desert scenes of *No Country...* are delightfully engrossing because of an absence of judder. This also applies to watching fast-moving sport on Sky

in HD. Don't expect a belted football to retain a perfect spherical shape but do enjoy an image unhindered by jerkiness. Motion resolution is also pretty decent, with the amorphous green space of a football pitch holding up better in a fast camera pan than on many current LED sets.

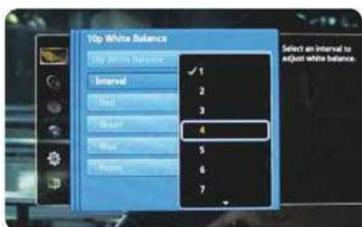
Voice control

In addition to a nicely designed everyday remote, Samsung bundles its TouchPad for web browsing and issuing voice commands thanks to a built-in microphone. You can also set up the TV to respond to gestures for changing channels and powering up. It's impressive when it works but we think most users will tire of a function that can randomly mute the screen because you've scratched your head.

Still, the default remote control works excellently in tandem with a slick and attractive user interface that keeps Samsung on top in the ease of use stakes – with one caveat. Personally, I think the Smart Hub is a bit of a mess. Yes, you can see connected TV options, the live Freeview/Freesat feed and external sources all in one place, but the folder types and placing of certain apps is rather random. There's no BBC iPlayer, either. Odd.

Yet the PS51E8000's operational foibles are forgivable given how successfully it manages to conjure up great 2D images and amazingly good 3D pics. It's not as accomplished or desirable as Panasonic's TX-P55VT50 (see p52) but it's nowhere near as expensive. Worthy of an audition.

→Analysis



GUI: Making picture tweaks is helped by neatly styled calibration menus, but the Smart Hub could benefit from a spring clean

Killer feature: While the PS51E8000's 2D images are hard to fault, it's the largescale Full HD 3D visuals that really impress

→Specifications

3D: yes Active Shutter

Full HD: yes 1,920 x 1,080

Tuner: Freeview HD, Freesat HD, CI slot

Smart TV: yes Samsung Smart TV

Connections: 3 x HDMI; 3 x USB; component; composite; Scart; DVI audio in (mini jack); digital optical audio out; Ethernet

Sound: 2 x 10W

Brightness: N/A

Contrast ratio: N/A

Dimensions (off stand): 1,193(w) x 713(h) x 48.1(d)mm

Weight (off stand): 21.3kg

Features: Built-in Wi-Fi; Real Black Pro panel; 600Hz Subfield Motion image processing; PiP; web browser; PVR via USB; Smart Hub interface; USB and DLNA Allshare multimedia playback; secondary touchpad remote; voice and gesture control; image calibration tools including dynamic contrast, black tone, flesh tone, RGB-only mode, dual Expert Patterns, Gamma, white balance, and 10p white balance



HCC VERDICT

Samsung PS51E8000 → £1,700
Approx → Supplier: www.samsung.co.uk → Tel: 0870 2420 303

Highs: Very good 3D and 2D hi-def pics; plenty of calibration tools

Lows: Dated design; lack of brightness; no iPlayer; no user-definable picture presets

Performance: 1 2 3 4 5

Design: 1 2 3 4 5

Features: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

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Bargain bigscreen

Why get a telly when you can open a cinema for the same cash?

Steve May auditions a reassuringly affordable Full HD projector

AV/CV

PRODUCT:
Affordable
Full HD home
cinema
projector

POSITION:
Between the
brand's W1000+
and step-up
W1200 PJs

PEERS:
Optoma HD23;
InFocus
SP8600;
Epson
EH-TW5900

This well-specified but inexpensive 1080p DLP projector could have many potential system upgraders considering projection for the first time. After all, for the cost of a 46in LED TV you could be enjoying images three times the size. It's a tempting proposition, not least because this BenQ PJ is a beautiful-looking piece of hardware.

Finished in à la mode white and sporting distinctive angled side panels, it measures a tidy 330mm edge-to-edge. The top of the unit offers soft-touch menu navigation

and connectivity is extensive. There are two HDMI inputs, PC VGA, component, S-video and composite, plus phono audio. There's even a 10W sound system onboard, which makes impromptu bigscreen gaming sessions difficult to resist – just plug in the Xbox 360 and start fragging. Don't crank up the volume, though, as the W1060's wee speaker is easily driven to distortion.

At just 3.63kg, this lightweight PJ should present few problems when it comes to ceiling mounting (BenQ offers an optional mount). Alternatively, it's small enough to pull

from a cupboard and pop onto a coffee table when required. The projector sucks cool air in from the side and vents it hot from the front, which is socially the best solution. While the best results are always going to be had with the projector positioned perpendicular to the screen (or at this price point, more likely a white wall), there is some basic keystone correction available if you have to setup off-axis.

You'll need a decent-sized room to obtain a large image, though. In my lounge, rival projectors routinely throw a larger image in the same

space. A 100in screen can only be filled from some four metres away.

The user interface is business-like. Input sources are scanned with rapidity, so there's no dawdling while the thing hunts for a live feed.

The W1060 offers a wide variety of picture quality refinements. In addition to a bank of image presets (Cinema, Gaming, Bright and Living Room) there are three user-definable modes, presumably to dedicate to different sources, which store preferred settings atop the aforementioned presets. Avoid Living Room as it tends to emphasise digital artefacts. Cinema offers the best out-of-the-box balance, including the most natural skin tone reproduction.

Tweakers can also delve into an Advanced mode that offers adjustment of Luma, Chroma, Detail Enhancement and Noise Reduction

The W1060 is a great-value Full HD projector, albeit one best suited to games rather than movies'

values. 3D colour management is also provided for those wielding colourimeters. To be honest, this is not an area most users will visit, and frankly the projector is no worse off for that anyhow.

More significant to the rest of us is the lack of variable fast refresh/high frame-rate modes. This has obvious implications for the projector's subjective motion resolution, which is limited to around 800 lines (at 6.5ppf). I also noted minor artefacts around certain moving objects, which could not be dialed out.

Yet overall picture fidelity is fine. Images have a colourful zing which is hard to hate. However, the projector's black level is limited. The W1060 delivers more of an overcast grey – consequently shadow detail tends to get lost in the murk. When the *Nostromo* glides into view at the opening of *Alien* (Blu-ray), it looks as

if it's sailing through intergalactic smog. Not what Ridley intended.

The W1060 is a single-chip DLP projector, and while the technology's trademark rainbows have been significantly curtailed thanks to advances in colour wheel design, they're still visible in areas of high contrast on certain types of content. Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Blu-ray) suffers rather badly in this regard. When the film crew make their first exploration of the Chauvet caverns, I found the starkly-lit sequence punctuated with distracting RGB flashes.

By way of contrast, the remastered Beatles animation *The Yellow Submarine* appears bold and colour rich. The only rainbows are there by artistic intention.

The W1060 is bright, with a 2,000 ANSI Lumens rating. You'll certainly get away with running it in a room with a low level of ambient light, perhaps when you get your mates around for a game tournie. In a controlled-light environment it makes sense to run the lamp on Eco mode. Not only does this reduce overall power consumption by 20 per cent, but it extends the lamp life.

Operationally, the W1060 behaves itself. The noise level drops to 28dB when running green, although that spinning colour wheel imparts a distinctive whine which you'll soon want to mask with a separate sound system.

Conclusion

BenQ's W1060 is a great value Full HD projector, albeit one best suited to games rather than movies. While it can be used quite happily for blockbusters, its presentation isn't entirely cinematic, thanks to that lack of profound black. The brand's W1100, which sells for around £900, or Epson's rival £1,000 EH-TW5900, offer a more convincing home theatre experience. That said, given the choice of a budget-priced light cannon like this or cookie-cutter flatscreen, I know which way I'd jump. ■

Spoilt for choice:
Connectivity is generous for this low price point



→Analysis

GUI: The onscreen menus lack visual flair but are comprehensive, and work well in conjunction with BenQ's supplied backlit remote control.

Killer feature: This really is a plug 'n' play product – small enough to be plopped on a coffee table (it comes with a carry case, too), and with an appetising price tag

→Specifications

3D: NO

Full HD: YES 1080p24

Connections: 2 x HDMI; component video; S-video; composite; PC D-Sub; stereo phono

Brightness (claimed): 2,000 ANSI Lumens

Contrast ratio (claimed): 5,000:1

Dimensions: 330(w) x 150(h) x 247(d)mm

Weight: 3.6kg

Features: One-chip DLP imaging system; 6,000-hour claimed lamp-life in eco mode; carry bag included; 10W sound system; manual zoom and focus; throw ratio 1.59:1.9 (56.8in at 2m); Cinema, Gaming, Bright and Living Room image presets; three user-definable viewing modes; 28dB operating noise



HCC VERDICT

BenQ W1060 → £700 Approx

→ Supplier: benq.co.uk

→ Tel: 0870 850 4417

Highs: Funky design; Full HD resolution; easy to use; colour-rich imagery; plenty of inputs

Lows: Limited motion resolution; weak onboard loudspeaker; doesn't deliver true black

Performance:

Design:

Features:

Overall:

Panasonic aims for the high-end

Panasonic has thrown down the gauntlet to its LED TV rivals with the ferociously specified WT50. The fight is on, says **Steve May**

If you've been harbouring suspicions that Panasonic is reserving its premium TV technology for plasma, then think again. The brand's new WT50 line of LED screens oozes proprietary refinement. For those in the market for a leading-edge LCD, Panasonic is determined to be on your shortlist. This is, quite simply put, a barnstormer of a TV.

The WT50 comes in 55-, 47- and 42in screen sizes. We're focusing on the latter, but all share the same excellent build quality (hats off to Panasonic's Czech facility), with a super-narrow metal frame, minuscule dark grey bezel and translucent lip with illuminated logo (which you can toggle off, thankfully).

The set ships with two remote controls – a standard zapper and a funky new Bluetooth touchpad. At least it does at retail. My review sample arrived *sans* touchpad – perhaps Panasonic decided to hide it from me, given how much I've disliked the touchpads shipped with its new Blu-ray decks. Can't say I'm overly disappointed.

The TV offers both Freeview HD and Freesat HD tuners. One of its three USB inputs (which sit alongside the usual roster of connections) can be assigned to an external hard drive for timeshift recording; you can record to an SD card, too. Given that there's only a single channel at your

disposal, this feature is best thought of as a PVR back-up option. Alternatively, you can set it to Constant Record, thereby creating a dynamic cache, allowing you to rewind what you're watching at any point or pause live TV.

Online all the time

The TX-L42WT50 comes with a wealth of IPTV and streaming entertainment, courtesy of Panasonic's Viera Connect internet portal, and its overall 'net performance is enhanced by a dual-core processor which allows a welcome level of multitasking. You can have, say, iPlayer and YouTube primed and ready to go, even while watching live TV; the live image literally 'peels' back should you want to access your apps. It's really a rather cool embellishment.

Unfortunately, multimedia playback isn't quite so rewarding. Accessed via the Viera Tools menu bar, the screen manages to play AVI, MP4 and MOV files across a LAN from an NAS but it baulks at MKVs. Things improve with the local USB media reader, which embraces this maverick container.

Other niceties include a radio mode, which automatically dims the display when an audio channel is selected from the EPG, and a web browser that supports HTML5.

The panel itself is a 3D-ready IPS type, with a wider than average viewing angle. As befits a high-end hotshot like this, there are a number of fast refresh technologies at play, leading Panasonic to assign it a 1600Hz backlit scanning badge. This transpires to be quite significant...

Powerhouse performance

This screen's hi-def performance is nothing short of exemplary. The panel plates up a tremendous amount of detail from high-definition sources, maintaining texture and tone in a way that's immediately impressive. Rarely do Freeview HD channels bring out the best in a TV (1080p Blu-ray is nearly always required), but here the WT50 sets a good standard even at tuner level. Indeed, I don't think I've seen any 42in TVs this year which look quite as good with BBC HD as this model.

It's also more contrasty than a Mod convention. The WT50's so-called Neo Black LED panel delivers very deep blacks. Indeed, the filter is so extreme I had to set brightness higher than normal just to obtain a comfortable greyscale. The screen also dampens external reflections, which further enhances blacks – yet detail is never lost. The opening alien tease in Gareth Edwards' *Monsters* (Blu-ray) maintains its dark, dramatic, nightvision authenticity, yet there's >

AV/CV

PRODUCT: High-performance, net-connected 3D LED LCD TV

POSITION: Panasonic's top-end Smart Viera LED proposition

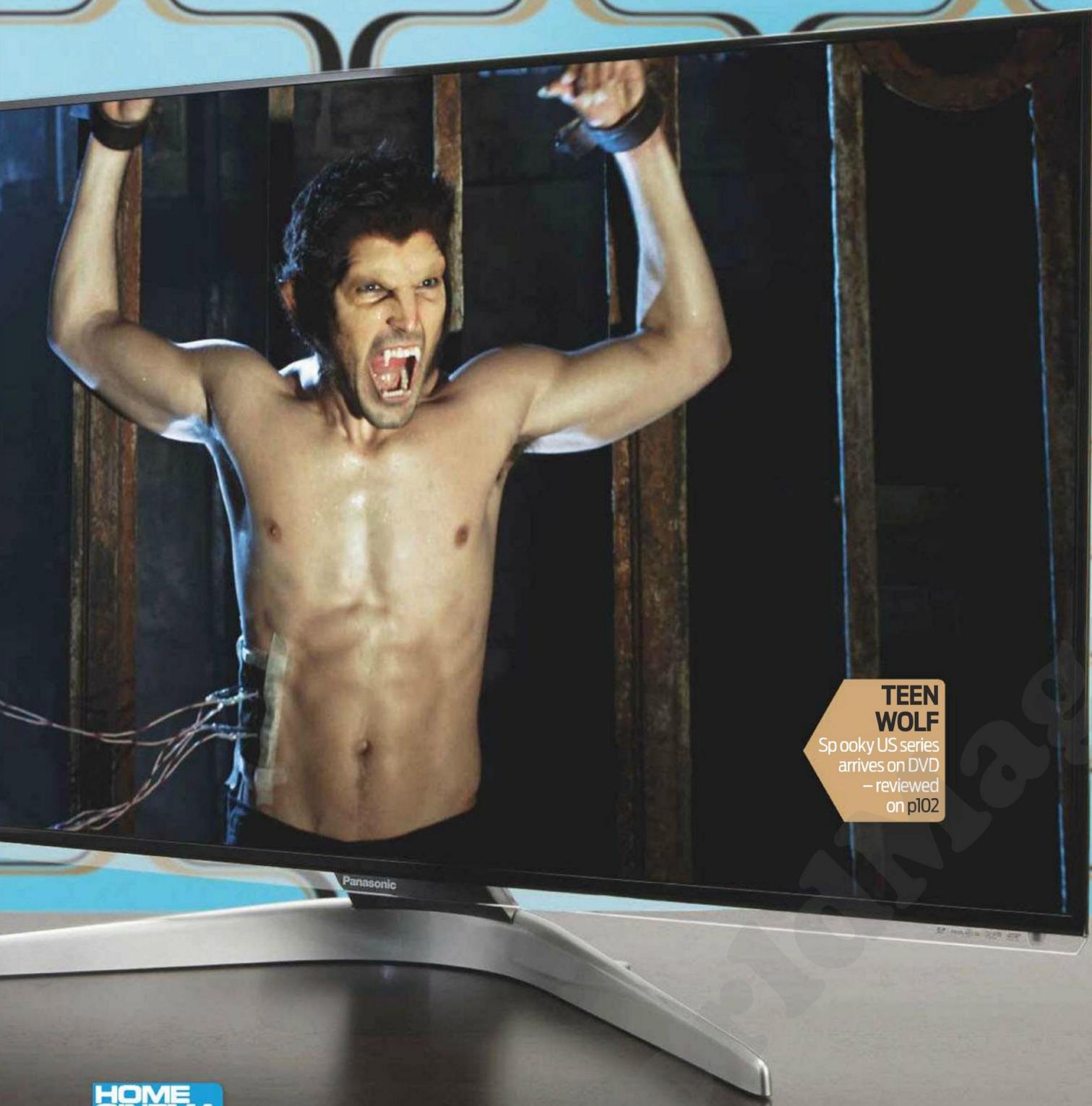
PEERS: Sony KDL-40HX853; Samsung UE46ES8000



Remotes: The touchpad remote is designed for improved browsing of Smart features



Panasonic's TX-L42WT50
is a premium-priced TV
with a design to match



TEEN WOLF

Spooky US series
arrives on DVD
– reviewed
on p102



Out of the shadows:

Black levels and shadow detailing are hard to fault

enough shadow detail to clearly see the creature on the rampage.

The WT50 utilises a new backlight area control technology which divides the screen into 16 portions – this allows it to intelligently control brightness. Backlight uniformity is reasonably good. I never felt distracted by light pooling from the edge LEDs.

For those that want it, there are exhaustive picture parameter controls to tweak, in addition to

'Panasonic's TX-L42WT50 serves up a tremendous amount of detail from high-definition sources'

a fistful of rather decent presets. It doesn't take very long to settle on an extremely agreeable image.

Motion resolution proves to be a particular strength. Panasonic's proprietary Intelligent Frame Creation mode has upped its game here, doubtless aided by the intrinsic speed of the panel. Normally, IFC needs to be approached with caution, but here to run without it imposes unnecessary visual penalties. Turned off, the set's motion detail tumbles below 600 lines, which translates to serious blurring. However, by placing IFC on the Min setting resolution pings back to Full HD. Impressively, this doesn't introduce any significant artefacts in the process, and horizontal panning is judder-free. The Mid and Max IFC settings do create smudgy artefacts;

they also introduce hyper-smooth horizontal panning (the 'soap opera' effect). My advice would be to leave IFC on the lower setting.

And what of the TX-L42WT50's Active Shutter 3D performance? Well, it borders on brilliant. Clarity is exceptional and eyewear brightness compensation effective. However, crosstalk double imaging does rather jump from the screen at inopportune moments to backslap your eyeballs. The menu screen from *Tangled* (Disney Blu-ray), which features an ever-increasing flood of Chinese lanterns, is quickly awash with ghostly duplicates. Still, I doubt kids will demand a refund.

The TX-L42WT50 supports the new, standardised Bluetooth RF protocol for glasses, with two pairs of spex included in the box. These prove surprisingly light and easy to wear.

Given the shallowness of the set, it still manages to deliver a relatively decent audio performance. There are actually eight drivers crammed into the frame, which create a distinct stereo spread, although the set can't manage much volume.

Conclusion

Panasonic has unleashed a premium screen with poise. HD picture performance is terrific, combining extreme sharpness with a subtle tonality that's mesmerizing to watch. I even like its 3D implementation – although that tendency to 'ghost' is a tad tiresome. Add a rich IPTV selection, slick dual-core multitasking and neat design and you've got a TV to be reckoned with.

→Analysis



GUI: Panasonic's menus remain intuitive and responsive, and the dual-core processor is used to good effect when using the IPTV services

Killer feature: The TX-L42WT50 is the brand's most ambitious LED yet in terms of design and build. The phrase 'reassuringly expensive' springs to mind – this is a set made for a high-end room

→ Specifications

3D: yes Active Shutter, two pairs of glasses supplied

Full HD: yes 1,920 x 1,080

Tuners: Freeview HD, Freesat HD, CI Slot

Smart TV: yes Viera Connect

Connections: 4 x HDMI; component (via adaptor); Scart (via adaptor); 3 x USB; SD Card slot; Ethernet; D-Sub PC input; digital audio output

Sound: 18W (2 x 4W, 1 x 10W)

Brightness (claimed): N/A

Contrast ratio (claimed): 'Infinite'

Dimensions (w/o stand): 956 (w) x 569(h) x 27(d)mm

Weight (w/o stand): 11kg

Features: Dual Core processor; integrated Wi-Fi; 1,600Hz Backlight Scanning; SD card/USB HDD timeshifting; USB media playback; DLNA content sharing; HTML5 browser; Dynamic, Normal, Cinema presets; Pro ISFccc 1 & 2 modes; IPS panel; 16-zone intelligent control of edge LED system



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic TX-L42WT50 → £1,800
Approx → Supplier: www.panasonic.co.uk → Tel: 0844 844 3899

Highs: Excellent HD detail and tonality; good IFC performance; multitasking dual core processor

Lows: 3D suffers from sporadic crosstalk; no support for MKV playback from network attached storage; serious price tag

Performance:

Design:

Features:

Overall:

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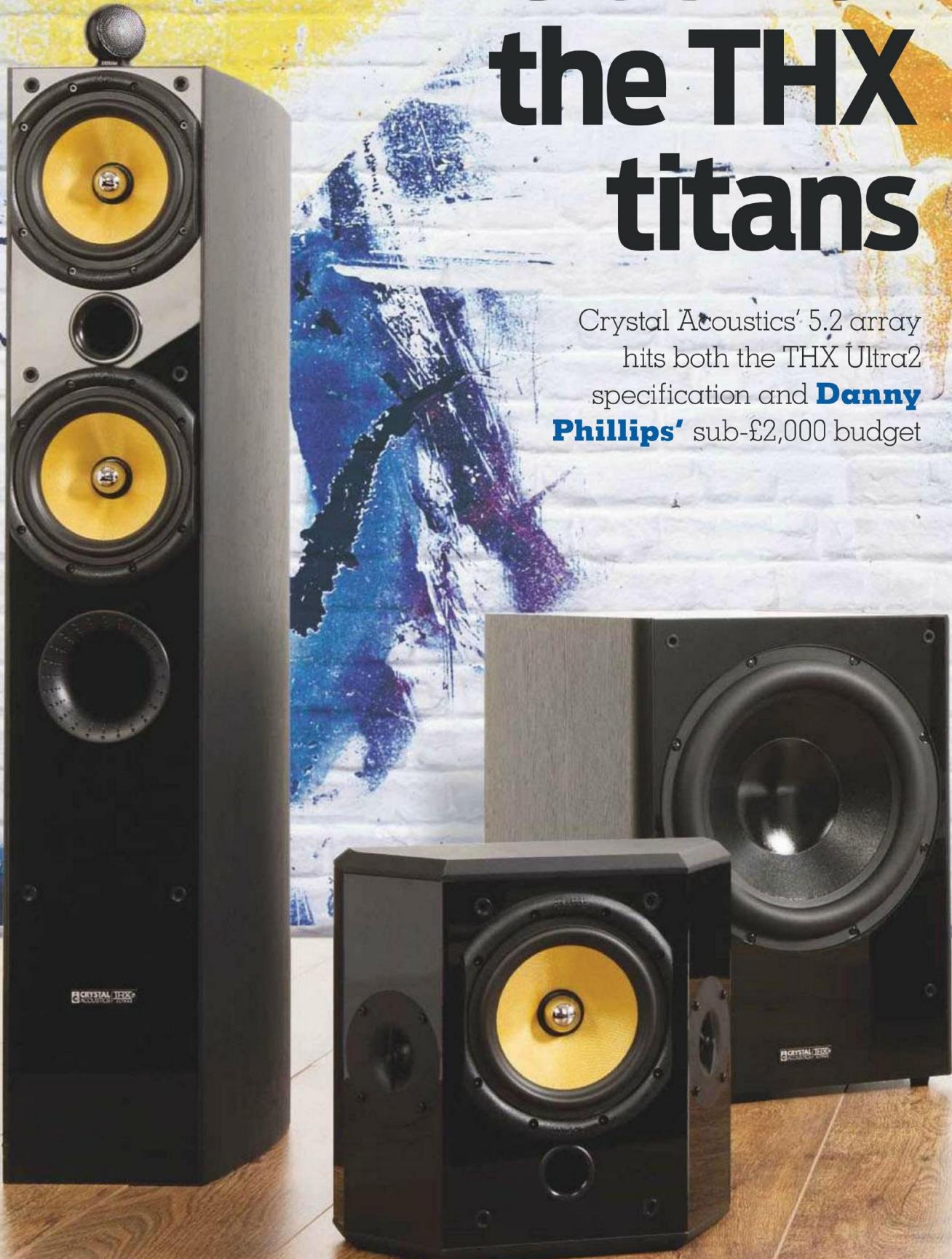
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Clash of the THX titans

Crystal Acoustics' 5.2 array hits both the THX Ultra2 specification and **Danny Phillips'** sub-£2,000 budget



From the country that brought us mythical beasts like the Minotaur comes a speaker system that's something of a titan itself. Athens-based Crystal Acoustics has unleashed the T2-5.2-UL, a THX Ultra2-certified speaker system with floorstanding fronts, dipole rears and not one but two subwoofers. And all for under £2,000.

It's not a system for the faint-hearted though. You get a lot of boxes for your money, and big ones at that. But if you have a viewing room waiting to be filled with thunderous multichannel sound, then the T2-5.2-UL could be worth the backache.

Believe it or not, this is actually a scaled-down version of the bonkers T2-7.4-UL, a £3,000

7.4-channel system aimed at serious bass junkies.

The THX Ultra2 certification means this setup is ideal for rooms up to 3,000 cubic feet in size, with a viewing distance of 12 feet or more from the screen.

The subs are absolutely massive – many people would struggle to get just one of these in their living room, let alone two. With the rest of the speakers also sporting big, bulky cabinets, it's worth stating that this is not a system you quietly integrate into your existing layout – you stick it in the room first and arrange everything else accordingly. In fact, I'd go as far to say that it's an array for dedicated cinema spaces only.

Not so mellow yellow

The front floorstanders (TX-T2SE) stand just over a metre high. With their grilles on, they're somewhat bland to look at. Whip the grilles off and you'll uncover yellowish cones with silver phase plugs poking out in the middle, giving them a slightly quirky feel.

That quirkiness continues with the balls on top of each cabinet, an updated version of Crystal Acoustics' 'free air' tweeters. Placing them on top allows them to shoot high frequencies at your lugholes without unwanted diffraction, and each one can be rotated towards your listening position. The driver array is completed by two 6.5in Kevlar/fibre woofers, each housed in their own ported chamber.

As advised by the THX spec, the rear speakers are a dipole design. These offer a listening experience like that of a real cinema, dispersing the sound into the room and along walls for

AV/CV

PRODUCT: THX Ultra2-certified 5.2-channel speaker system

POSITION: Scaled-down version of 7.4-channel T2-7.4-UL system

PEERS: Boston Acoustics A Series; Acoustic Energy Radiance



Space invaders: Make sure you have room for this seven-speaker setup before you buy!



maximum immersion. They can be mounted on the wall using the supplied brackets. Meanwhile, the THX-CT centre speaker is a bulky beast, again with a rotatable 'free-air' tweeter perched on top that may make placement a bit tricky.

The TX-12SUB subwoofer comes equipped with a front-firing 12in long-throw woofer moved by heavy duty magnets, backed up by a 200W amplifier. The high gloss and black

'Designed with movie thrills in mind, the Crystal Acoustics package favours firepower over finesse'

ash cabinet matches the rest of the system, with dual ports and extensive bracing to make them as acoustically dead as possible.

With just one sub ostensibly capable of shaking your home's foundations, why would you need two? There are several advantages, the main one being that bass is distributed more evenly throughout the room so that low-end frequencies sound good from any listening position. It can also help to cancel out boomy resonances and control standing waves in certain areas of your room.

And of course, two subs give a more potent performance, enabling the system to hit THX's reference output. It takes a bit of trial and error to get it right, though. Helpfully, each one provides a range of controls on the back to tweak the volume, reverse the phase and select between 'variable' and 'THX' modes – the former allows you to control the volume using the dial, while the latter meets the THX spec with amplifier gain set 4.5dB lower.

Double bass

After placing the subs on opposing walls, which achieved more satisfying results than opposite corners of the room, I stepped into the intimidating 5.2 arena armed with a DTS-HD Master Audio test disc filled with juicy scenes from various blockbusters – and the T2-5.2-UL gobbed it up and snarled for more. This is a powerful performer, capable of large-scale dynamics with effortless control and drive. That's due largely to the twin subwoofer arrangement – which sends robust, forceful bass into every nook and cranny – but it's commendably hammered home by the front, centre and surrounds. Inter-speaker integration is watertight and the soundstage is spacious.

Take *X-Men: First Class* for example. As the mutants gear up for an air attack on Russian warships, the pounding drums create a sense of stirring urgency, faithfully communicated by the front trio. Jet engines scream around the room, passing between front and rear speakers with tonal consistency and smoothness. Then the *coup de grâce*, as the missile hisses its way towards the battleship and blows it up with a rich, visceral boom. A loud, punchy blast, but beautifully controlled.

Designed with movie thrills in mind, the CA package favours firepower over finesse. If you're looking for glacial objectivity and clinical detail retrieval you should hunt elsewhere.

That's not to say there's no sophistication. High frequencies sound crisp and sparkly, plus the centre's dialogue is imbued with depth and texture. But it doesn't get right inside a scene and pull out those super-fine details like some similarly-priced systems can.

But that's a minor drop of negativity in an ocean of positives. The T2-5.2-UL is great value, boasting good build quality and providing adrenalin junkies with a fix of unadulterated power.

And even if it's not your cup of tea, Crystal Acoustics' no-quibble 60-day returns policy (this is a mail-order retailer, remember) means you can send it back – but with this sort of performance, that really would be a Greek tragedy.

→ Specifications

TX-T2SE fronts

Drive units: 2 x 7in Crystal Fibre woofers; rotating 'free air' 1in soft dome tweeter

Frequency response: 35Hz–22kHz

Sensitivity: 91dB

Power handling (max): 300W

Dimensions: 200(w) x 1011(h) x 300(d)mm **Weight:** 19kg

THX-D-BLA rears

Drive units: 1 x 7in Crystal Fibre woofer; 2 x 1in soft dome tweeters

Frequency response: 45Hz–22kHz

Sensitivity: 88dB

Power handling (max): 200W

Dimensions: 310(w) x 310(h) x 147(d)mm **Weight:** 7kg

THX-CT-BLA centre

Drive units: 1 x 7in Crystal Fibre woofer; 1 x rotating 'free air' 1in soft dome tweeter

Frequency response: 45Hz–22kHz

Sensitivity: 89dB

Power handling (max): 200W

Dimensions: 550(w) x 215(h) x 162(d)mm **Weight:** 7kg

TX-12SUB-BLA subwoofers

Drive units: 1 x 12in long-throw paper cone woofer

Frequency response: 15Hz–350Hz

On board power: 200W (RMS)

Dimensions: 350(w) x 471(h) x 470(d)mm **Weight:** 29kg

Connections: Line-level input



HCC VERDICT

Crystal Acoustics T2-5.2-UL → £1,800
Approx → Supplier: www.crystalaudiovideo.com

Highs: Powerful, commanding sound; superb room filling bass; solid build quality; lots of boxes for the money

Lows: Not as insightful as some in its class; uninspired design; hard to accommodate

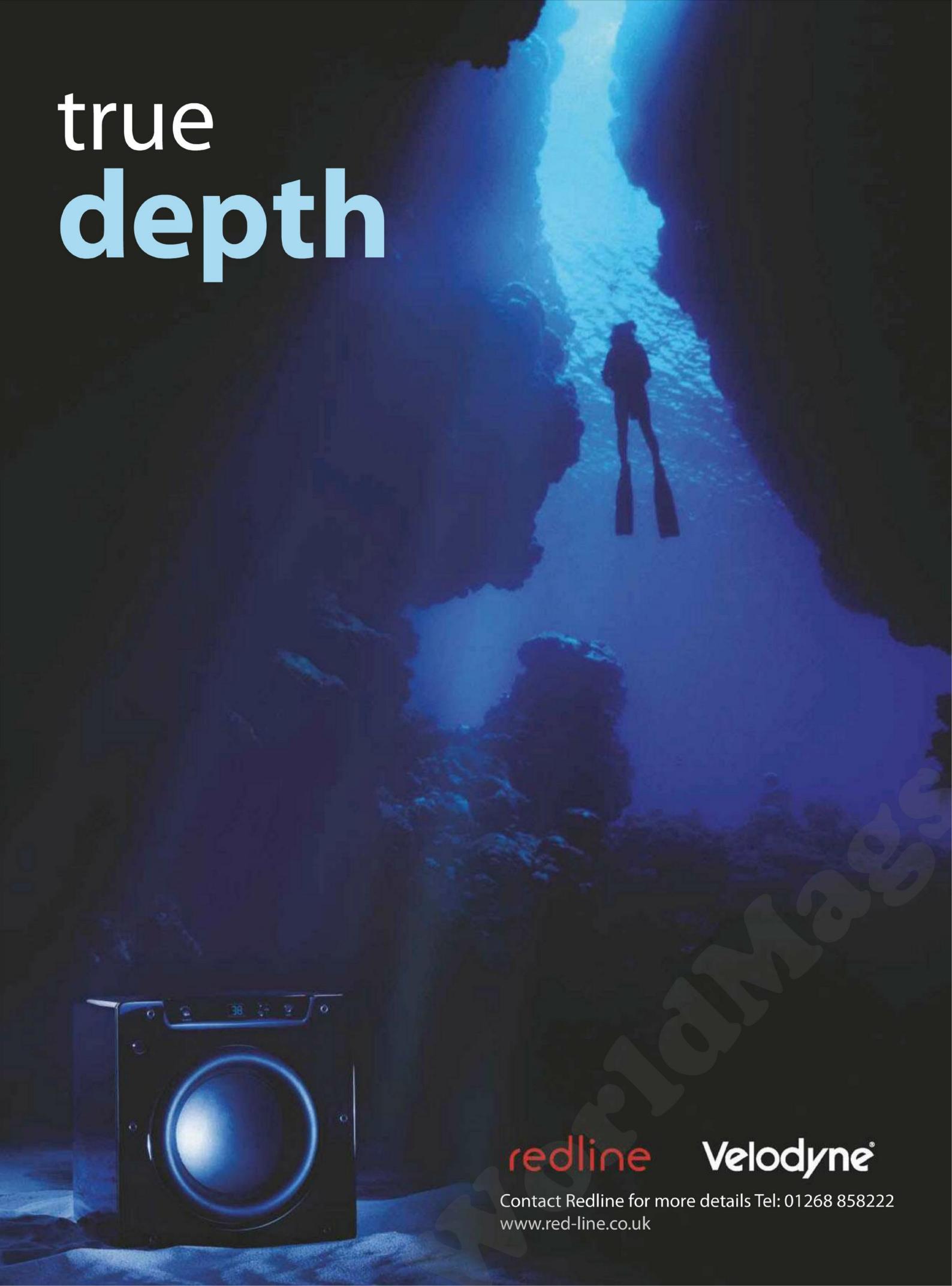
Performance:

Design:

Features:

Overall:

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Slammin' system

Panasonic's switchable 2.1 system may look and feel lightweight but, reveals **Steve May**, it drops some heavy beats



Another brick in the wall: Buyers will need to find space for the external processor

Do you want a soundbar? Or a 2.1 system with a standalone processor? Acknowledging that there's gold in them thar TV audio upgrade hills, Panasonic has decided to attack both markets with the SC-HTB550 – a novel package that can either be configured as either soundbar with subwoofer, or a more conventional stereo speaker pair and sub. The main enclosure splits in two, you just orient accordingly.

The addition of a separate audio processor, which provides connectivity, amplification and signal processing, makes the system particularly noteworthy. This sort of gubbins is usually built into the sub.

There are two HDMI inputs (one ARC compatible), and dual optical digital audio inputs for source hook-up. The system is also Bluetooth friendly. Unlike the similarly priced Samsung HW-E551, there's no USB media reader or any kind of readable visual display.

Simple sub

Speaker build quality is largely insubstantial. The downward-firing subwoofer, with its 6.25in driver, lacks weight. It's a simple beast – you just need to switch it on.

The soundbar itself is flat-facing and shiny. At full stretch it reaches nearly a metre in length. Behind the

unremovable grille are a pair of 2.5in woofers and a 1in tweeter.

Assembling the SC-HTB550 proves both simple and frustrating. Colour coded cabling provides few challenges, but transforming the 'bar into a stereo pair is a faff. Still, my concerns over construction and finish were largely washed away when the system took flight. Against all the odds, it sounds rather fine. There's unexpected snap and vigour to its presentation, which is well suited to action movies and high octane TV shows such as *Band of Brothers* (which I was using as a BD demo disc – those gun retorts are fierce!).

In its default mode, 3D sound processing is applied to all multichannel sources. Closer inspection reveals this to be a Dolby Virtual surround algorithm overlaid with Panasonic's in-house soundfield processing, which adds extra width and height. The mix is a potent cocktail. While it can be switched off, the system sounds much better when this processing is engaged. Bullets appeared to ricochet around the room in convincing fashion, not bad given the physical constraints of the cabinets. Clearly more than just another 2.1 TV audio upgrade, the SC-HTB550 defies expectations to give deliver a solid, cinematic performance.

→ Specifications

HDMI:	YES 2-in, 1-out
Stereo phono audio:	NO
Digital audio:	YES 2 x digital optical inputs
Dolby TrueHD/DTS-HD compatible:	YES/YES
Total Amplification (Claimed):	2x 60W; 1x 120W subwoofer
Dimensions (processor unit):	310(w) x 44(h) x 195(d)mm
Weight (processor unit):	1.1kg
Dimensions (soundbar):	956(w) x 102(h) x 74(d) mm
Weight:	1.61kg
Features:	Wireless subwoofer; Bluetooth audio streaming; Dolby Virtual Surround; 3D Surround Effect; switchable between 2.1 and soundbar configuration

AV/CV

PRODUCT: Soundbar/2.1 system

POSITION: Sits alongside regular 2.1 systems in Panasonic's range

PEERS: Samsung HW-E551

HCC VERDICT

Panasonic SC-HTB550

→ £400 Approx

→ Supplier: www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

Highs: Effective 3D sound processing; goes loud and doesn't skimp on the slam

Lows: Plasticky build quality; rubbish remote control; not good for music

Performance:

Design:

Features:

Overall:

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Building a wall of sound

The TVee Model 30 embodies old-fashioned values, says **Steve May**

It's a curious irony that soundbars have been shrinking. Originally created to compensate for the thin audio produced by slim TVs, today's mainstream models are now almost as thin as the screens they aim to support. Boston Acoustics' TVee Model 30 is different – a heavyweight enclosure weighing 3kg and running almost 1m wide.



Pros

- As befits its girth, the TVee Model 30 creates a big, meaty soundstage. There are two DSP modes, music and movies; the latter is particularly effective, offering a sense of enveloping spatial surround that's rarely heard from 2.1 systems.
- The wireless sub lacks slam but offers real depth, reaching down to

around 30Hz. The soundbar, which utilises six drivers, works from 100Hz up. Build quality is excellent.

Cons

- No remote control is supplied. You'll need to partner one from another device using the system's learning functionality, or fiddle with controls tucked under the bar's grille.
- There are no HDMI inputs provided, just digital audio and phono stereo. The optical input works well with a Dolby Digital 5.1 sound source, but falls silent when fed a DTS bitstream. The solution was to have my connected Blu-ray player convert to PCM.

HCC VERDICT

Boston Acoustics TVee Model 30
£450 Approx

Overall:

[LG ND8520 → £250 Approx → www.lg.com/uk](http://www.lg.com/uk)

Six-sided source selector

Mark Craven frees his MP3s with LG's dicey dock

With so many iPod/iPad docks coming to market, manufacturers are having to work harder to make their products stand out from the crowd. LG's approach with the new ND8520 is to adopt a radical, retro-infused styling – at a time when many rivals are exploring curved edges and clean lines.

Looking like an oversized, all-black Rubik's Cube will certainly help grab buyers' attention, but what may look good on a shop shelf doesn't always fit in well at home.

Pros

- LG has endowed its dock with plenty of features, including both AirPlay compatibility and Bluetooth (useful if family members are split across Android and Apple devices); a USB input for stick-stored MP3s; FM radio; and even an alarm clock.
- The twin speaker-'n'-subwoofer combination lurking within (driven by

a combined 80W of amplification), musters up decent volume levels and takes a stab at filling your room. That said, go too high on the volume dial and it starts to strain.

- The front LED panel is actually touch-sensitive – swipe a finger across it to switch between sources. A dinky remote is also bundled.



Cons

- The overall presentation of the ND8520 is somewhat bass-heavy, with the downward-firing woofer outgunning its HF siblings easily. Not a dock for critical listening.
- With the left and right drivers close together, there's little in the way of a stereo image.
- The design is very much an acquired taste – the provision of an alarm clock implies LG imagines the ND8520 possible being used in a bedroom, but it's really too large for a bedside table. At the same time, it's a bit kooky for your living room – nor is it portable. Buy it for your kids' playroom, maybe?

HCC VERDICT

LG ND8520
£250 Approx

Overall:

In Brief

The Cabin in the Woods: Official Visual Companion
Titan Books
£18 Approx



This brilliant book is a must for fans of Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon's cinematic celebration of horror films. As well as lengthy interviews with the duo, it packs in masses of behind-the-scenes photos and gorgeous artwork, plus the complete shooting script!



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WHAT HI-FI?
SOUND AND VISION



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AV Receiver
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 **YAMAHA**
Powered by music

**A.C. RYAN
VEOLO**

£170 Approx

A.C. Ryan's PlayOn! range of media players has proven very successful, but how will this new Android-based unit perform?

**MAXELL
MMB300**

£150 Approx

Another Android player, Maxell's MMB300 runs a more up-to-date version of the software and comes with a DVB-T USB tuner

**NETGEAR
NEOTV 550**

£120 Approx

It may lack apps and movies-on-demand, but Netgear's mid-range player majors on usability and AV performance

**SONY
SMP-N200**

£70 Approx

This second-gen Smart TV upgrader gives you access to the Sony Entertainment Network, and DLNA streaming, at a bargain price

Battle of the black boxes

Martin Pipe assesses a quartet of cutting-edge multimedia players all vying for a place in your kit rack

Today, most higher-end TV sets are Smart. They have in-built media players that can pull content from internet portals, and play multimedia files stored on home networks. But if your TV lacks such functionality – or you're using an alternative display such as a projector – these little devices can Smarten them up. All of the players tested here have some kind of online access, and are compatible with all manner of audio, video and image formats. And, while past media players have been based around proprietary technology, this is changing – two of the contenders in this roundup run the Android operating system, familiar to many smartphone users. Can they out-smart their rivals?

Robot malfunction

This Android-based player promises a lot, but has some operational flaws



A.C. Ryan has been responsible for some of the better networked multimedia players of recent years. Another entity that started rising to prominence at about the same time is the smartphone. The best-known example of this is, of course, the iPhone, which is rivalled by a range of devices running Google's Android – a Linux-derived operating system optimised for handheld devices. However, some are now taking Android and building it into other electronic gizmos.

One such company is A.C. Ryan itself, which sells the Veolo – a gently-domed wedge containing an Android-based media player. But as an Android device, it can do so much more than play video clips, music or photos. For a start, you get access to the Android Marketplace (since renamed to the less descriptive Google Play). This gives you the opportunity to run your choice of apps – hundreds of which are available. Android smartphone users will already be aware of the flexibility this brings – there are apps for many different applications, most of which are free.

Then there's the ability to conduct Google searches, send/receive e-mail or view websites with a browser that supports HTML5, Flash and Chrome v8 Java. In other words, most modern websites can be accessed. The Veolo can even be configured to act as an NFS or FTP server, with appropriate storage attached. Cool.

Such functionality demands a remote handset that's very different to the norm, and A.C. Ryan has risen to this particular challenge by producing one that has an accelerometer-driven 'touch-and-swipe' system to move a pointer around the screen to select functions (like the mouse of a PC). It also sports a rather rubbery keyboard for text entry, in addition to a few token normal buttons, such as a joypad and standby key.

Unfortunately, the handset is rather frustrating to use and dovetails rather poorly with one of the least intuitive user interfaces I've come across. The keyboard is non-tactile, and suffers from 'bounce' (unwanted double characters) on the occasions it doesn't ignore your input. Yet it's needed for searches and configuration.

The device connects to your flatscreen via HDMI, and to your network via Wi-Fi or Ethernet. I went for the Ethernet option – more reliable for streaming HD video – but had no luck getting the Veolo to access my shared (SMB) network drives. It was the only player of the group tested to give me such grief, and not even the patient techie at A.C. Ryan could resolve the problem. NFS didn't work, either – and as supplied the Veolo does not support DLNA/uPnP. There is a workaround to fix the latter, but it requires a lot of messing about. All of which is a pity, as the Veolo was capable of dealing with every file format and codec I



Remote:
A complex
beast – and
frustrating
to use

threw at it via the side-mounted USB port.

And the apps? There's a store (App Center), but you can also go in via Market/Google Play – something that's denied to the other Android player, the Maxell MMB300, in this roundup. Although some media players offer a limited amount of online content (as do Smart TVs) the app approach ensures you have more choice and are always up to date. YouTube (a Google app) worked well after download, and I also spent some downtime enjoying the excellent internet radio app, Tuneln.

A Google Play search didn't find BBC iPlayer, but I was able to go in through the back door via a regular Google search. The app was claimed to be compatible with the Veolo, but failed to install. A.C. Ryan's explanation is that the Veolo doesn't support the required version of Flash. In all, the Veolo is an interesting idea compromised by flawed execution – and a lack of documentation.

Froyo's limitations

The Veolo runs v2.2 ('Froyo') of the Linux-based Android operating system. This is hardly cutting-edge in Android terms, with new tablets running 3.x (Honeycomb). And don't expect a firmware update – the hardware at the heart of the Veolo will influence what OS (and apps) can be run at acceptable speed (just as it does in the PC world). Inside the Veolo, you'll find a 1GHz ARM Cortex-A9 processor with Java acceleration, hardware-accelerated 3D graphics, 512MB of RAM and 4GB of non-volatile memory.

After blank cassettes...

...comes an Android media player. But, again, it's not quite up to speed



Photo finish:
A side-mounted SD card slot is a welcome bonus for digital camera owners

Better-known to those of a certain age for blowing away the Bauhaus lead-singer with the sound of its iconic cassette tapes, Maxell has since embraced the digital age with gusto. One of its more interesting current products is the MMB300, a multimedia player based around the Android 2.3 operating system.

This is slightly more up to date than the version running on the rival A.C. Ryan product. The MMB300 is also supplied with a DVB-T USB stick tuner, enabling it to act as a digital terrestrial set-top box with the



Remote:
Another handset with a dedicated keyboard – because Android requires it

Android with a rather impractical handset. This large item includes a three-button accelerometer-based navigation device to

drive the pointer, a few dedicated buttons and a keyboard with buttons that are just too small to be practical.

As a networked multimedia player, the MMB300 certainly worked better than the Veolo. It was able to detect and list my SMB servers – I could then choose the ones containing relevant content for future access. Media compatibility proved to be excellent, with all common codecs catered for. Yet although you can change the resolution in the settings menu, you have no control of refresh rates in the HD (720p/1080i/1080p) modes. The default is 60Hz, ensuring that UK-derived material suffers from motion judder. In contrast, the Veolo gives you the necessary options.

A limitation shared with the Veolo is the lack of uPnP/DLNA support. I did try an (admittedly 'beta') app that claimed to add the feature, but it failed to work. Media can also be played from USB storage devices.

More troublesome was the TV app, which didn't detect the tuner – I tried both USB ports and a hard reset, but to no avail. If this had worked, the MMB300 could be used to watch free-to-air SD digital TV services, and presumably record them, too, with a storage device plugged into the other USB port.

'The Maxell's media compatibility is excellent, with all common codecs catered for'

pre-installed app. It even comes with an indoor aerial, but external ones can be used, too.

Larger and flatter than the Veolo, the MMB300 resembles a broadband router – even to the extent of sporting a Wi-Fi aerial. For those who can't connect via Wi-Fi, Ethernet is offered as an alternative. And while the Veolo is HDMI-only, the MMB300 gives you analogue component video, too. As with the A.C. Ryan, there's an SD card slot.

Maxell has dealt with the additional complexities of driving

Instead of the official Android Marketplace/Google Play, Maxell provides something called 'SlideMe' to help you choose and install apps. Although no BBC iPlayer app is available on SlideMe, a search on Google found the Android iPlayer app. However, no Maxell devices were shown on the Google Play compatibility list and so I couldn't proceed any further.

Other apps, notably internet radio and YouTube, installed without a hitch, and the web browser worked just as efficiently as the Veolo's.

The MMB300's user interface is more intuitive than its Android competitor's but it still leaves much to be desired. Android is a great idea, optimised for touch-screen devices like smartphones, but on this evidence it needs to be rebuilt for the rather different demands of a set-top box environment.

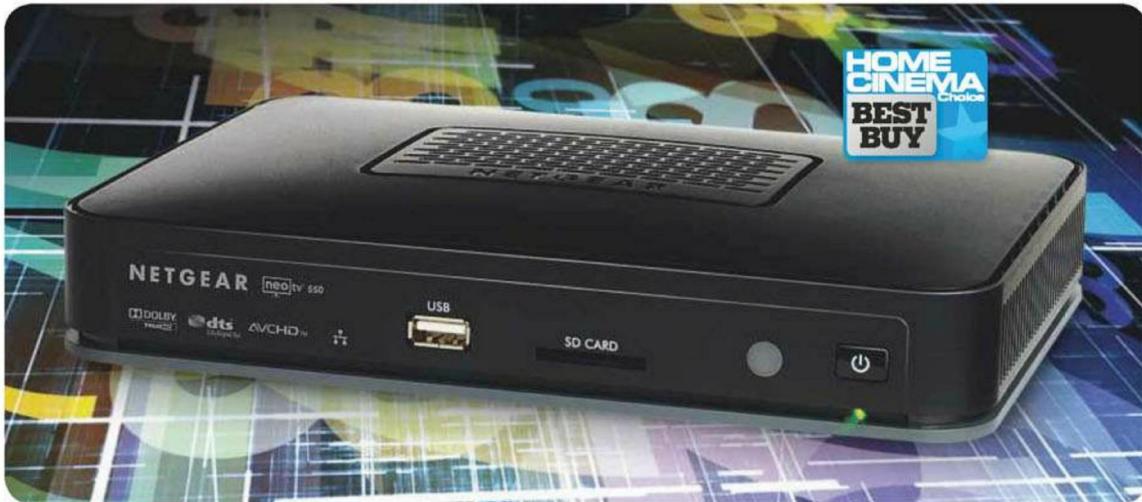
Under the lid



The MMB300 runs the newer 2.3 version of Android, potentially increasing the range of apps. The pre-installed portal is a limiting factor; indeed, the YouTube and internet radio apps were inferior to ones I found for the Veolo. In fact, the hardware spec is slightly inferior to the A.C. Ryan's, too. There's 512MB of RAM and the ARM Cortex processor only runs at 800MHz, although it's aided by an ARM Mali-400 3D graphics engine. Flash memory is again 4GB.

Old-school enforcer

Netgear's NeoTV 550 may lack frills but does its job effectively



Netgear, better-known for its NAS boxes and routers, has for some time also been producing network devices of another type – media players. One of its stable is the NeoTV 550, which, thanks to its lack of Android, Boxee, etc, feels reassuringly traditional. It's not out-dated, though – as well as networked content, the player gives you a choice of some online material, and the ability to feed media into it via USB or SD cards.

A no-nonsense slab of a device that can be positioned on its side courtesy of a tabletop stand, the 550 is well-featured in terms of connectivity. In addition to the front-mounted USB port and SD slot are analogue component, composite video/stereo analogue audio (a 3.5mm-to-phono cable is supplied for this purpose), optical digital audio, eSATA (for external hard drives) and HDMI 1.3a port. Connection to your network is via Ethernet, although the 550 can connect via Wi-Fi provided an optional dongle is plugged into a second rear-panel USB port. It's a shame that Wi-Fi isn't integrated.

The accompanying handset is neatly designed, and provides quick access to all functions. A setup wizard gets you going quickly, although configurations can easily be changed later courtesy of a comprehensive menu. One of the most useful features can be found in the audio settings menu. Every key audio standard – e.g. DTS, AAC and

Dolby Digital – can be decoded, or passed through as a bitstream. If your AV receiver cannot handle a format, then the 550 will convert it into the linear PCM format that all home cinema gear can deal with.

Interestingly, DTS and Dolby's hi-res audio formats are supported, too. And indeed the 550 can deal with network-stored BD rips – although the region selector that's also buried in the menus may be somewhat redundant, as the unit doesn't seem to support USB-connected BD-ROM drives.

However, there's little else that the 550 cannot cope with. All of the test files I tried worked fine, from DivX clips to DVD ISO images (complete with menu access). Subtitle files, if present, are synchronised with the video, and SMB, NFS and uPnP standards are all supported, thereby covering the majority of network storage scenarios.

Homebrew interface

Netgear's NeoTV runs proprietary firmware rather than Android or Boxee, and is geared to playing media stored on networked computers and storage devices (including, uniquely amongst this group, eSATA). This is reflected in the conventional user interface that, on the whole, is best described as functional but easy to use. Note that the NeoTV can integrate with some Netgear NAS boxes (photo libraries, for example), and an iPad remote control app is available.



Remote:
This simple handset makes scouring your content a breeze



Access to media is very quick.

A nice touch is that photo selection is icon-based for quick access. Thumbnail versions of the images are cached, either on a network drive or – for speed – a USB storage device. A list view is offered as an alternative. Other well-considered features include a 'fit screen' video mode, which does as it says (use this with your TV's aspect ratio mode, if available), media information popup, parental controls and a lip-sync adjustment. A wide range of display modes (from 480i/576i to 1080p/24) is provided. Picture and sound quality are in essence as good as the content allows.

Compared to some other players, the amount of online content is rather limited – and has an American slant to it. However, most of the important ones are there. YouTube, Flickr, local weather forecasts and 'net radio are present and correct. In addition, you get access to either RSS feeds or video/audio podcasts from the likes of CNN, Wired, ESPN, NBA, ABC, NBC, Reuters, NPR and Engadget. A concession to us Brits is a comprehensive selection of BBC audio podcasts. iPlayer is, however, conspicuous by its absence.

In all, the NeoTV 550 is a decent media-playback package, with a simple handset and sensible menus – but if your tastes stretch beyond the confines of your own network then you might want to consider the alternatives.

Old habits die hard:
The NeoTV 550 even looks a bit like a Wi-Fi router

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Sony boxes clever

The SMP-N200 is an affordable player with on-demand ambitions



Set square:
Sony's player
sports a
minimalist
design

Take the internet TV capabilities of a recent Bravia flatscreen television and shove them into a little box (that's operated with one of the coolest-looking handsets ever to grace a multimedia player) and you get Sony's latest entry into this competitive field.

The Big S's way of doing things is proprietary, as a company of its resources can allow, and, true to form, the interface here is the Xross Media Bar (XMB), as pioneered on the PlayStation. It's used to good effect here; accessing content and setup menus is fluid-smooth and speedy, too.

But before you get that far, the device needs to be integrated with the rest of your equipment – a wizard (no, not Gandalf) helps you through the process. Sony gets full marks for the inclusion of an integrated Wi-Fi option, in addition to Ethernet, in a £70 player – there are AVRs costing £2,000 that still don't offer that. You also get HDMI, HD-supportive component (useful if you've run out of HDMI ports) and – as a last resort – composite video. Audio can be conveyed via HDMI, optical digital or in analogue form via a pair of phono sockets.

The SMP200 doesn't offer the eSATA port of the Netgear, but there's a USB port for playing local media. It's side-mounted, so plugging a memory device into it does spoil the device's svelte lines. USB can nevertheless be quite useful, as the only networked multimedia system

supported by the N200 is uPnP/DLNA – which doesn't support all kinds of content. It's a pity that NFS or SMB aren't catered for. Presumably, they could be added as the SMP-N200 is built around Linux, but at this price (comfortably the lowest in this grouptest) savings have to be made somewhere.

With DLNA, you simply navigate around networked folders until you find the file you want to play. Even via USB, though, some types of file (e.g. DivX and FLAC) refused to play.

Although the DLNA side of things is compatible with all servers that meet the standard (such as Windows Media Player and many NAS boxes), Sony has done its own thing and made its own variant, dubbed HomeStream, available for (free) download. This performs very well, but, despite being DLNA-compliant, only seems to work with Sony devices.

Another example of Sony's proprietary nature is 'party streaming', which enables you to arrange for the same music to be simultaneously-played on other Sony DLNA-compatible products around the house (rather amusing is the 'start party' button that kicks off the process).

Finding servers (or USB files) is straightforward. When available, you'll discover them listed under 'music', 'video' or 'photo' on the Xross Media Bar. Scroll up or down, and highlight the one you want to bring up the folders. Also in these



Remote:
The best of
the bunch –
smart and
uncomplicated

categories is an impressive range of online content. Demand 5 and the BBC iPlayer are included in 'video', as are LOVEFiLM, Sky News, Eurosport, AOL HD, YouTube and much else besides – Sony easily outguns its grouptest rivals in this department. And then there's the subscription-based Sony Entertainment Network (see box out, below). Letting the side down, however, is the SMP-N200's lack of internet radio support.

The final rabbit in Sony's hat is a web browser, but I suspect owners will make little use of this. Employing a virtual keyboard to enter URLs and search terms – as opposed to the keyboard of the Maxell and A.C. Ryan products – is, quite frankly a pain. Furthermore, the browser doesn't support Flash or Java.

So, the SMP-N200 features picture and sound quality that don't disappoint, a superb user interface and an eye-catching price. However, the lack of support for internet radio, non-DLNA networking and some codecs should be taken into account by potential buyers.

On-demand delights



Unique to connected Sony products like the SMP-N200 is integration with the Sony Entertainment Network (SEN) subscription service, which is split into movies and music sections (gamers also get the PlayStation Network). Here, on-demand films, TV series and tunes can be sorted in a number of ways (genre, artist and so on). Unless you pay up, though, only 30-second snippets of music (with rather poor audio quality) are offered.

Final standings

The breadth of codecs supported by these players puts some Smart TVs to shame. In addition, they can deal with multiple networking protocols – notably SMB, NFS and uPnP/DLNA. Modern TVs, in contrast, can usually only access content stored on uPnP/DLNA-based servers.

This is also true of the £70 Sony SMP-N200, which is essentially the Smart element of a Bravia flatscreen encapsulated within a dinky box. It ignores some popular codecs, which is a pity, as it's superbly designed and benefits from the slick XMB user interface. And some loyal

Sony users will appreciate the SMP-N200's integration with the company's Entertainment Network.

If support for codecs galore (and, for that matter, Blu-ray 'rips') is of key importance to you, my recommendation is the Netgear NeoTV 550. Its only downside is a relative paucity of online content – there's no BBC iPlayer here, for example.

Robot wars

The two Android players are not compatible with iPlayer either, although the range of apps available will impress users whose TV

horizons extend beyond mere passive entertainment. Both are well-served in terms of formats and codec compatibility, but of the two my preference is the Maxell MMB300, as the A.C. Ryan Veolo proved to be difficult to drive. My inability to access network storage via the latter can, I hope, be attributed to a sample fault. Yet even the Maxell unit has its faults, particularly the lack of HD refresh rate control.

A final point about the pair of Android players is that they're both more expensive than their rivals – buyers pay a premium for that world-renowned platform.

1ST



HCC VERDICT

Netgear NeoTV 550
→ £120 Approx → Supplier:
www.netgear.co.uk

Highs: Decent connectivity; well thought-out setup and use; excellent media compatibility
Lows: Wi-Fi isn't built in; limited selection of online content

Performance: 5
Design: 5
Features: 5

Overall: 5

2ND



HCC VERDICT

Sony SMP-N200 → £70 Approx
→ Supplier: www.sony.co.uk

Highs: Integrated Wi-Fi; intuitive user interface; plenty of online content available; affordable
Lows: Web browser of limited value; no 'net radio; some codecs not supported

Performance: 5
Design: 5
Features: 5

Overall: 5

3RD



HCC VERDICT

Maxell MMB300
→ £150 Approx → Supplier:
uk.maxell.eu

Highs: Apps can be a boon; good file support
Lows: TV tuner app failed to work; fixed 60Hz HD refresh rate; no DLNA/uPnP networking

Performance: 5
Design: 5
Features: 5

Overall: 5

4TH



HCC VERDICT

A.C. Ryan Veolo → £170 Approx
→ Supplier: www.acryan.com

Highs: Excellent file compatibility; good web browser
Lows: User interface needs considerable work; failed to detect our SMB servers; no DLNA/uPnP networking

Performance: 5
Design: 5
Features: 5

Overall: 5

→ Specifications

HDD: No (but eSATA and USB external drives supported)

Connections: 100Mbps Ethernet; HDMI 1.3a (up to 1080p/24); eSATA; 2 x USB; SD slot; component; composite; stereo analogue audio; optical digital audio

Video file format support (verified): MOV; MPEG-1; MPEG-2; MKV/x.264; XviD; DivX; WMV; MP4; AVC-HD; BDMV; ISO; VIDEO_TS; TS; M2TS

Audio file format support (verified): M4A; FLAC; MP2; MP3; WAV; AC3; DTS; DD+; Dolby TrueHD; DTS-HD MA

Dimensions: 432(w) x 38(h) x 254(d)mm **Weight:** 2.0kg

Features: Some online content; Blu-ray compatible; HDMI/optical digital audio passthrough modes independently selectable for different audio codecs; thumbnail navigation (photos, cover art) or list-view; subtitle support; AV sync adjustment; photo slideshows; SMB, NFS and DLNA/uPnP support

→ Specifications

HDD: No (USB external drives supported)

Connections: 100Mbps Ethernet; HDMI 1.3 (up to 1080p/24); USB; component; composite; stereo analogue audio; optical digital audio

Video file format support (verified): MPEG-1; MPEG-2; WMV; MKV/x.264; MP4; AVC-HD; M2TS

Audio file format support (verified): M4A; MP3; WAV; WMA; AC3; DTS

Dimensions: 150(w) x 41(h) x 150(d)mm

Weight: 0.41kg

Features: Integrated (b/g/n, 2.4GHz) Wi-Fi; Sony Entertainment Network; access to online content portals (inc.

BBC iPlayer and Sony 3D streaming/photos); Xross Media Bar user interface; DLNA/uPnP support; web browser; smartphone control app available; AV sync adjustment; picture noise-reduction adjustments; photo slideshow

→ Specifications

HDD: No (USB external drives supported)

Connections: 100Mbps Ethernet; HDMI 1.3 (up to 1080p50/60); 2 x USB; SD card slot; component; stereo analogue audio; coaxial digital audio

Video file format support (verified): MOV; MPEG-1; MPEG-2; MKV/x.264; XviD; DivX; WMV; MP4; AVC-HD; TS; M2TS; ISO

Audio file format support (verified): M4A; FLAC; MP2; MP3; WAV; AC3; DTS

Dimensions: 188(w) x 30(h) x 180(d)mm

Weight: 0.5kg

Features: Integrated (b/g/n, 2.4GHz) Wi-Fi; Android 2.3 operating system with app support; web browser; handset with navigation device and keyboard; subtitle support; NFS and SMB support; DVB-T 'dongle' (indoor aerial supplied); file/network explorer; slideshow

→ Specifications

HDD: No (USB external drives supported)

Connections: Gigabit Ethernet; HDMI 1.3 (up to 1080p50/60); 2 x USB; SD card slot; stereo analogue audio; coaxial digital audio

Video file format support (verified): MOV; MPEG-1; MPEG-2; MKV/x.264; XviD; DivX; WMV; MP4; AVC-HD; TS; M2TS

Audio file format support (verified): M4A; FLAC; MP2; MP3; WAV; AC3; DTS

Dimensions: 150(w) x 36(h) x 114(d)mm

Weight: 0.375kg

Features: Integrated (b/g/n, 2.4GHz) Wi-Fi; Android 2.2 operating system with app (Android PIT) support; web browser; handset with 'touch-and-swipe' keyboard; subtitle support; NFS and SMB support; server functionality; file/network explorer; slideshow

Finishing touches

Adrian Justins trawls the shelves for those must-have home cinema extras

ROTH AUDIO K RADIO

From £150 approx

One of the most underrated benefits of modern radio technology has to be the way in which you can listen to stations from all around the world. There are countless UK and foreign broadcasts available on internet radio, a feature found on some AV receivers and Smart TVs, and, as here, a bedside radio. The Roth K, which comes in a range of technicolor finishes, uses Ethernet or Wi-Fi to access online stations, alongside its more traditional DAB and FM tuners.

The touch-operated radio is also a docking station for an iPhone or iPod, providing access to a portable device's iTunes library, plus content from phone-stored services, such as Spotify and YouTube. Non-Apple phones, tablets and MP3 players can be connected via a 3.5mm jack.

www.rothaudio.co.uk

HCC VERDICT

What next – live TV streaming?

KINGSTON WI-DRIVE

£60 approx

There's something of a portability strand this month, including this pocket-sized 32GB flash memory drive (a £90 64GB version is also

available), which allows you to create your own personal cloud when travelling. With integrated Wi-Fi and four hours of battery life, Kingston Wi-Drive offers storage and file sharing for any Wi-Fi device such as a smartphone, tablet or Kindle Fire.

Operating the unit is simple. You transfer content, including photos, music and videos, from a computer to the Wi-Drive using a USB 2.0 connection and then view/listen to it by establishing a wireless connection to your portable device. Access can be achieved by either a web browser or the free Wi-Drive app.

www.kingston.com/europe

HCC VERDICT

Pricy, but convenient



HANNSG HP225DJB

£125 approx

Badly-positioned PC screens are literally a pain in the neck and it's odd that height adjustable monitors, like this 21.5in HannsG, aren't more commonplace. The HP225DJB's height adjusts by 8cm – it also tilts through 15° and swivels through

30°. Other specs include a 1920 x 1080 resolution, 5ms response time and VGA and DVI-D inputs.

www.hannsg.com

HCC VERDICT

Just add speakers





PHILIPS PICOPIX 2480

£280 approx

Pico projectors are primarily aimed at business people looking to show off their latest GfK figures. And, with a resolution of just 854 x 480, 80 Lumens of brightness and a contrast ratio of 1,000:1, it seems that the PicoPix is more the projector equivalent of the portable TV than a SIM2 C3X. Still, there are occasions when AV enthusiasts are away from

base camp and only a whopping 120in image will do.

Philips' LED-lit PicoPix 2480 is geared up for showing off digital pictures, movies and games thanks to its HDMI, VGA, component, composite video, SD card and USB connections. The unit also



features 2GB of internal memory with a built-in MP4 player, plus 3.5 mm audio output.

www.philips.co.uk

HCC VERDICT

Take your cinema on the road



PSB M4U 2

From £110 approx

Canadian speaker-maker PSB has announced its debut in the crowded headphone market with these sumptuous-looking closed back cans, dubbed Music For You or M4U 2 (presumably M4U 1 never took off).

For comfort, the M4U 2 features a four-point gyroscopic ear-pad mount that automatically adjusts to the contours of the listener's head. PSB reckons that the use of soft ear-pads and the cans' light weight makes the M4U 2 headphones seem to 'disappear' when worn, so that only rich, detailed sound remains.

The Active Noise Cancelling feature covers a broad spectrum of noise reduction, which measures the sound both inside and outside the ear cup. The

external microphones also provide a monitor function at the touch of a button.

The active amplifier used in the M4U 2 design claims to improve the sound of portable music devices – by allowing the internal amp of those devices to work into the 'easy load' of the M4U 2 input, distortion is apparently lowered, and the battery life of the portable music player extended. Unlike many other headphones that use active amplification, the M4U 2 can also be enjoyed in 'passive mode', handy for when you forget to change depleting batteries before a long trip.

www.psbspeakers.com

HCC VERDICT

Your ears will love 'em

Clips...

Small items that will make a big difference to your system

Panasonic RP-SDU32GD1K SDHC memory card



£45 approx

Get in to the spirit of the London 2012 Olympics with this 32GB souvenir memory card from Panasonic, which features a picture of the one-eyed mascot and comes pre-loaded with 3D and 2D content. The class 10 card has 90MBps read speed and 25MBps maximum write speed www.panasonic.co.uk

Elgato Thunderbolt cable



£50 approx

Thunderbolt SSD storage offers a

maximum transfer speed of 10GBps, which is double that of USB 3.0. This bespoke 50cm cable from Elgato, which packs specialised microchips to aim for 'optimal throughput', is a must-have for backing up from a Mac or Windows PC. www.elgato.com

BBC Sport app

£Free

Owners of Sony's Smart hardware, including Blu-ray decks and Bravia televisions, can now access a dedicated BBC Sport portal that's just popped up on the Sony Entertainment Network (SEN) in time for 2012's major sporting events. www.sony.co.uk

GoPro Dive Housing



£50 approx

As we're being all sporty this issue, how about capturing your own Summer's swimming on a GoPro camera with the GoPro Dive Housing? This aquatic add-on features a large, flat glass lens that allows for maximum photo and video sharpness underwater and is waterproof to a depth of 60m. Not quite James Cameron levels, but a good place to start. www.gopro.com

THE TOP 20

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation. The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVDs, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

ACHIEVING POTENTIAL

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.



WHAT AND WHERE TO BUY

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with **WHAT**, start with **WHERE**. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one.

Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit **you**.

“ ...Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. ”

So good you'll believe you're there!

GUIDE

TO BUYING HOME A CINEMA SYSTEM



BUYING OR BEING SOLD TO?

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

GETTING THE BEST DEAL

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.

LISTED BELOW ARE 20 OF THE BEST AV SHOPS IN THE COUNTRY

They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

SOUTH

Chelmsford RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND &

VISION

216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Colchester NEW TECHNOLOGY UNLIMITED

33 Sir Isaac's Walk. 01206 577682
www.newtechnologyunlimited.com

Kingston-upon-Thames INFIDELITY

9 High Street, Hampton Wick.
020 8943 3530
www.infidelity.co.uk

Maidenhead AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street. 01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Rayleigh, Essex RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street. 01268 779762
Custom Install Dept.
01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road. 01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

Tunbridge Wells KENT HOME CINEMA

69 London Road, Southborough.
01892 535007
www.kenthomecinema.co.uk

LONDON

Ealing AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street. 020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

SW20 O'BRIEN HI-FI

60 Durham Road.
020 8946 1528
www.obrienhifi.com

MIDLANDS

Coventry FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street. 024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way. 0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

Solihull MUSIC MATTERS

93-95 Hobs Moat Road. 0121 742 0254
www.musicmatters.co.uk

NORTH

Chester ACOUSTICA

17 Hoole Road. 01244 344227
www.acoustica.co.uk

York SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate. 01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

STAR QUALITIES

VALUE FOR MONEY	★ ★ ★ ★
SERVICE	★ ★ ★ ★
FACILITIES	★ ★ ★ ★
VERDICT.....	★ ★ ★ ★



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*Correct at time of print

PLAYBACK

→ **Anton van Beek reviews** JOHN CARTER 3D To infinity and beyond?
GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE Burn baby, burn! Nic Cage cuts loose in 3D **THE WOMAN IN BLACK** Harry Potter takes on theatre's most successful spook **SHERLOCK HOLMES: A GAME OF SHADOWS** Conan Doyle's master detective receives a masterful Blu-ray **AND MUCH MORE!**

Mahna-Mahna!

The Muppets → Walt Disney Home Entertainment → All-region BD

After more than a decade out of the spotlight, Kermit and friends are back in action. Is the magic still there? Find out in our BD review on p105...

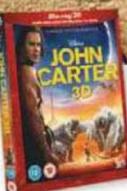


HCC Ratings key

Sherlock Holmes	1 2 3 4 5
Jack Gittes	1 2 3 4 5
Clarice Starling	1 2 3 4 5
David Mills	1 2 3 4 5
Inspector Gadget	1 2 3 4 5



John needed serious help to win his first Martian tug-of-war



Mars needs moviegoers

Can Disney turn Edgar Rice Burroughs' sci-fi icon into an unstoppable spex machine?



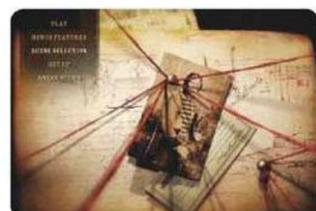
→ John Carter 3D

A century after he first appeared in print, Edgar Rice Burroughs' sci-fi hero has finally made the leap to the silver screen. Unfortunately, despite all of its flashy CG wizardry, *John Carter* can't help but feel vaguely old-fashioned.

The big problem is that, for all the action and spectacle the film can muster, Burroughs' stories have 'inspired' generations of novelists and filmmakers, from Frank Herbert to George Lucas. Because of this the belated film adaptation now feels surprisingly second-hand, with few concepts and set-pieces that you won't have seen before. It's still a fun sci-fi romp, but you'll end up wishing it was something more.

Picture: Despite some set-pieces that make effective use of the added depth (Carter's escape from Zodanga in Chapter 12 being a particular highlight), for the most part the 3D presentation is pretty lacklustre. Though technically proficient, the MVC 2.40:1 1080p encode falls flat on a number of occasions and struggles to really bring anything to the film.

The AVC 2.40:1 1080p 2D version is another matter. Pin-sharp, brilliantly coloured and packed with intricate detailing, it's everything you could want from a HD blockbuster.



HCC VERDICT

John Carter 3D → Walt Disney Home Entertainment
All-region BD → £28 Approx

We say: Hi-def video and audio add some extra spectacle to this old-fashioned sci-fi epic

Picture:

Sound:

Extras:

Movie:

Overall:

Audio: If *John Carter*'s 3D visuals often feel a little flat, the same cannot be said of the DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix that accompanies both versions of the film. Whether it's Chapter 1's opening Airship battle or Chapter 13's arena face-off, the soundtrack unleashes a torrent of dynamic panning effects and thunderous bass into your viewing room.

The incredible scope of the audio proves the ideal match for the film's epic scale, but importantly never allows the dialogue to get lost in the mix.

Extras: As usual with Disney's 3D releases, there are no extras on the stereoscopic disc so you'll have to switch to the accompanying 2D platter instead. And, while it ditched the Disney Second Screen app that appeared on the US release, it still delivers a handful of quality extras.

Director Andrew Stanton joins producers Jim Morris and Lindsey Collins for a commentary discussing the film's genesis and production. *100 Years in the Making* is an 11-minute look at the source material and earlier attempts to bring the stories to the screen. Meanwhile, the 35-minute *360 Degrees of John Carter* offers a twist on the traditional

Making of... and gives a fascinating insight into the amount of work that went into just one day of the shoot. Rounding things out are ten deleted scenes and a blooper reel.



The Sting

Universal Pictures → All-region BD £20 Approx



Universal appears to be throttling back on its digital filtering if this latest catalogue release is any indication. While there are still some signs of artificial smoothing in the AVC 1.85:1 1080p hi-def transfer, there's also plenty of grain and fine detailing on show. More bothersome is the frequently soft nature of the film itself – something the high-quality visuals make more apparent than ever before. At least there are no issues with the immersive DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack.

Extras take the form of a three-part *Making of...*, the trailer and three Universal Centenary featurettes.

**The Bridge: Series One**

Arrow Video → Region B BD £40 Approx

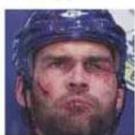


Swedish and Danish cops must work together when a body is found in the middle of a bridge linking the two countries. What follows are ten episodes of high-quality Nordic noir, made even more compelling by Sofia Helin's mesmerising turn as the socially-awkward detective Saga Norén.

Arrow's two-disc Blu-ray is sadly devoid of extras, but compensates somewhat with impressively textured AVC 1.78:1 1080i visuals that revel in the desaturated palette. The atmospheric LPCM 2.0 audio is joined by forced English subtitles.

**Goon**

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD £20 Approx

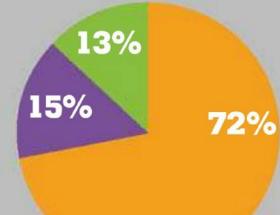


While it's hardly the next *Slap Shot*, there's still plenty of fun to be had with this crass comedy about a dim-witted oaf (Seann William Scott) whose brawling skills land him a spot as an 'enforcer' on an ice hockey team. The Blu-ray platter delivers a sharp AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode and spry DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack that sometimes buries the dialogue when things get too hectic. The US disc's chat-track and interactive Power Play Mode aren't present, but all 45 minutes of video material from the latter are present in the extras menu alongside a host of other goodies.

**We asked...**

What do you do with the bonus DVD copies of films that come bundled with Blu-ray releases?

- Leave them in the box unused
- Give them to family or friends
- Use them myself to watch the film on other devices



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Diary of a teenage supervillain

Troubled teen gets superpowers and a camera. What could possibly go wrong?

→ Chronicle: Extended Edition

These days it's practically impossible to pay a visit to the cinema without being confronted by yet another superhero flick. Practically every Hollywood studio is getting in on the act now, with things only likely to get even more crowded now that *Avengers Assemble* has made about a gazillion dollars at the box office.

Thanks heavens then for *Chronicle*, a smart new take on the concept that mixes super-powered teens and the 'found footage' genre (think *Blair Witch...* meets *Misfits*). Only here, what starts off as a simple tale of teen empowerment made possible by mysterious telekinetic abilities soon escalates into something much darker, building towards a super-powered showdown that wouldn't look out of place in a \$150million blockbuster, but was somehow done in a film that only cost \$12million in total. Great stuff.

Picture: *Chronicle*'s AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode is a bit of a game of two halves. To begin with the film's protagonist shoots everything with a standard-definition camera. But after 'the incident' he switches to a more expensive hi-def setup (although the movie was actually shot on much more expensive professional kit).

Naturally, the Blu-ray image quality takes a sizeable jump at the same time, offering up plenty of fine detailing and strong colour reproduction. And, if it's still not exactly top-tier HD video, it still looks much better than you'd expect from a 'handycam' flick like this.

Audio: Like *Cloverfield* before it, *Chronicle* might go out of its way to convince you that it's all been filmed using consumer cameras, but there's no getting away from the fact that the DTS-HD MA

5.1 audio always sounds like it belongs to a traditional Tinseltown production.

Things may start off pretty restrained, but as soon as the trio start experimenting with their powers things step up a gear. The aircraft flyby in Chapter 11 blasts across the soundstage with vigour, while the action-packed showdown in Chapters 21 and 22 offers a *tour de force* of dynamic surround effects and high-impact sonic thrills. Better than you might have expected.

Extras: A first-time film director like Josh Trank should have quite a bit to say about making his debut movie, right? Apparently not. Apart from the ability to choose between watching the 84-minute theatrical cut and 90-minute extended cut (the latter featuring a few more character beats, nothing particularly exciting), the only extras on the Blu-ray are a single deleted scene, an 8-minute reel of pre-viz animatics for two sequences, a 4-minute camera test and the trailer. The set also includes a Digital Copy.

**HCC VERDICT**

Chronicle: Extended Cut
20th Century Fox
All-region BD → £25 Approx

We say: This fresh take on the 'found footage' and superhero genres hits the spot in HD

Picture:

Sound:

Extras:

Movie:

Overall:



This is why Spider-Man wears spandex rather than a hoodie

The case of the giant stink bomb was one of Holmes' toughest



Holmes cinema choice

Looking for the very best in hi-def picture and sound? It's elementary my dear reader...

→ **Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows**

This sequel to Guy Ritchie's successful 2009 cinematic reinvention of Conan Doyle's 'consulting detective' finds Holmes (Robert Downey Jr) and Watson (Jude Law) joining forces with Gypsy fortune-teller Simza (Noomi Rapace) to foil the nefarious plans of master criminal Professor Moriarty (Jared Harris).

Despite the film's criminal under-use of Ms Rapace, *A Game of Shadows* proves just as much fun as its predecessor. Big, bold and brash, it's Holmes re-imagined as a blockbuster superstar. Skating by on charm and spectacle, it lacks the smarts of the source material, but we've always got BBC's *Sherlock* for that side of the character.

Picture: This big-budget sequel is every bit as visually slick and polished as the 2009 release and makes quite an impact on Blu-ray. Presented as an AVC encode, the 2.40:1 1080p imagery is dominated by cold blues and faded sepia tones, yet still manages to wow the viewer thanks to the impeccable textures on display and the overall clarity of the image.

Admittedly, the slow-motion footage looks a little softer than the surrounding material, but that's an unavoidable trade-off in quality that stems from the source. Otherwise it's hard to find anything to complain about. Artefacting, banding and edge enhancement are all absent, meaning this encode scores top marks.



HCC VERDICT

Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows – Triple Play Warner Home Video → All-region BD/R2 DVD → £25 Approx

We say: A stunning AV package for this entertaining sequel

Picture:

Sound:

Extras:

Movie:

Overall:

Audio: Given its gun-toting, fist-flying take on Sherlock Holmes, it hardly comes as a shock to discover that *A Game of Shadows*' soundtrack packs a hell of a wallop. Subtlety and restraint were clearly not the order of the day when it came to mixing the audio – the sound designers have created a breathless and energetic DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundscape that gives real weight to the film's flashy visuals. No wonder Chapter 9 and 10's forest chase takes pride of place as this issue's Demo screen over on p106.

Extras: The main extra to be found is a *Maximum Movie Mode* picture-in-picture track hosted by a flippant Robert Downey Jr. While frequently very amusing, it's not the most insightful account of the film's production, so help is on hand with the inclusion of additional behind-the-scenes footage and storyboards. The *Maximum Movie Mode* also provides links to seven *Focus Point* featurettes at relevant points during the film, although they are also available to view separately via the disc's Special Features menu.

And that's your lost as far as disc-based extras are concerned. Annoyingly, the remaining goodies (interviews, pre-viz animatics, script-to-screen comparisons, storyboards, maps, character biographies and more) can only be accessed on a tablet or other portable device to view as a 'Second Screen' experience via the *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows Movie App*. The Blu-ray also ships with a bonus DVD and UltraViolet Digital Copy of the film.

Antiquated apparition

Old-school ghost story suffers from the curse of studio interference on UK shores

→ The Woman in Black



Based on Susan Hill's best-selling novel, this period chiller stars Daniel Radcliffe as Arthur Kipps, a widowed lawyer sent to oversee the sale of an isolated coastal house that locals claim is haunted by a terrifying apparition. Of

course, it doesn't take long for Kipps to realise that there's more to the story than mere superstition. But how can he escape the ghostly curse?

Packed with moments designed to have you leaping out of your seat, this handsome film is an effective attempt at crafting an old-fashioned ghost story for a modern audience. Unfortunately, given the source material, it has an awful lot to live up to, and ultimately it comes second best to the book, stage play and the supremely chilling Nigel Kneale-scripted 1989 ITV adaptation.

Picture: *The Woman in Black* cuts a pretty fine figure on Blu-ray thanks to its film-like AVC 2.40:1 1080p presentation. The spooky nature of the story means that it's not necessarily the most colourful movie you'll ever seen, but some delightfully intricate detailing and strong black levels go some way to making amends for the rather drab palette. Skin tones also veer more towards the 'pasty' end of the scale, but this is undoubtedly true to the filmmaker's intent.

Audio: Ghost stories typically provide fertile ground for intense aural effects and playful positional audio. And, while the latter element is certainly well represented by *The Woman in Black*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack, it never reaches the dynamic peaks you'd expect. This



Hogwarts really went downhill after Harry graduated

may stem from the fact that Momentum Pictures toned down some elements of the mix (along with darkening some scenes and cutting six seconds of film) in order to secure a 12 certificate in the UK. Can we have the original cut, please?

Extras: As well as the audio commentary by director James Watkins and writer Jane Goldman (which is well worth a listen to make sure you catch all of the film's spooky apparitions), 10-minute *Making of...* featurette and 4-minute interview with Daniel Radcliffe that appeared on the US Blu-ray, Momentum's disc also conjures up a fair selection of UK exclusives. These include additional interviews, 22 minutes of red carpet tomfoolery from the London premiere, three trailers, four image galleries (*Behind the Scenes*, *Film Stills*, *Production Design and Storyboards*) and Radcliffe reading the winning entry from a ghost story competition that was presumably run to support the film's UK cinema release.

HCC VERDICT

The Woman in Black
→ Momentum Pictures
Region B BD → £25 Approx

We say: A compromised hi-def outing for an old-school chiller

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5



Intruders

Universal Pictures → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Even the usually reliable Clive Owen can't do much with this lacklustre supernatural thriller from the director of *28 Weeks Later*. The film recounts two parallel tales, one in England and one in Spain, both featuring a child being haunted by a faceless bogeyman. What could the link be? Well, if you can't work that out long before the final revelation, then you simply haven't watched enough films.

The Blu-ray delivers richly cinematic AVC 2.40:1 1080p imagery and a fairly lively (if unimaginative) DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. Modest extras include six deleted scenes and four short featurettes.

1 2 3 4 5

A Dangerous Method

Lionsgate → Region B BD
£25 Approx



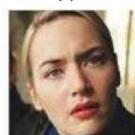
David Cronenberg steps away from the world of body horror for a more 'classy' and cerebral kind of cinema with this study of the formative years of psychoanalysis. While this may disappoint some fans, those with a more open mind will find a fascinating movie powered by Keira Knightley's ferocious performance as the disturbed young woman who falls under the spell of Michael Fassbender's Carl Jung.

With its luscious AVC 1.85:1 1080p visuals and DTS-HD MA 5.1, the only disappointment are the minimal extras – just a *Making of...* and commentary.

1 2 3 4 5

Carnage

StudioCanal UK → Region B BD
£23 Approx



This Blu-ray release of Roman Polanski's latest film left me shocked. Not by its rather stage-bound story or mannered performances (it's actually an often funny film), but by the fact that it features an MPEG-2 hi-def encode. I thought those went out of fashion around the same time as Profile 1.1 Blu-ray players. The good news is that this doesn't seem to impact on the imagery quality to any great degree, with the 2.40:1 visuals well-defined throughout. Less impressive is the flat DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix, which is firmly anchored to the front speakers. Four interviews make up the extras.

1 2 3 4 5

We Bought a Zoo

20th Century Fox → All-region BD/
R2 DVD → £25 Approx



Inoffensive is probably the best word to describe this latest film from

helmer Cameron Crowe. Based (extremely) loosely on the story of Dartmoor Zoological Park owner Benjamin Mee, Crowe's slightly sappy flick shifts the tale to the US and – via the medium of cute animals and even cuter kids – makes it all about the importance of family. Whatever you think of the movie, there's no denying that Fox has delivered an exceptionally strong BD package, with superb AVC 2.40:1 1080p imagery, dynamic DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio and a menagerie of extras.

1 2 3 4 5

100 FROM DUSK TILL DAWN TRILOGY → THE EXPENDABLES

Yatterman

Eureka → Region B BD
£20 Approx



Having reigned in his more outrageous sensibilities for the sublime *13 Assassins*, this live-action update of a '70s anime series lets director Miike Takashi cut loose once again, filling the screen with manic action and CG effects. The resulting film is a bit too smutty for kids and is too tongue-in-cheek for fans of the original *Yatterman* 'toon, so I'm at a loss to guess who exactly it's aimed at. That said, I found it quite enjoyable in a very daft way – and there's no denying that it both looks and sounds great in hi-def thanks to the AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics.



Rampart

StudioCanal UK → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Woody Harrelson gives an astonishing central turn as a corrupt cop in this film set against the corruption scandals that rocked the LA police department in the 1990s. Indeed, it's such a superb performance that you can't help but wish it was anchored to a more interesting narrative than the rather predictable character study. *Rampart* is content to serve up. At least the film's visuals prove rather more arresting, something that shines through courtesy of the BD's rich AVC 2.40:1 1080p transfer. Extras take the form of a 30-min *Making of...* documentary and a trio of interviews.



Catch .44

Anchor Bay → Region B BD
£20 Approx



It's easy to see why the likes of Bruce Willis and Forrest Whitaker were attracted to this debut feature by writer/director Aaron Harvey. With its intricate plotting and tricky narrative structure, *Catch .44* often feels like the bastard offspring of Elmore Leonard and Quentin Tarantino. Unfortunately, there are a few too many self-referential jokes (Bruce Willis' album? Ugh!) that spoil the fun and take the edge off the film. The BD itself boasts an attractively detailed AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and surprisingly forceful Dolby TrueHD 5.1 track. The disc also offers up an interesting chat-track.



The Expendables: Director's Cut

Lionsgate → Region B BD
£20 Approx



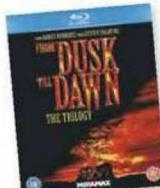
With a sequel hitting cinemas this Summer, it's no surprise to find *The Expendables* being revisited here as a 113-minute 'Extended Director's Cut'. As with *Rambo*, this isn't only about adding new footage – Stallone has effectively re-edited the film.

Technically, the disc's AVC 2.40:1 1080p visuals and DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack are as impressive as before. There are less extras this time, but there's a fascinating new 20-min interview with Sly about his career, and the brilliant 92-minute *Inferno* doc is included in hi-def this time around.



Undead Tarantino really sucks...

...but not half as much as straight-to-DVD horror sequels made on the cheap



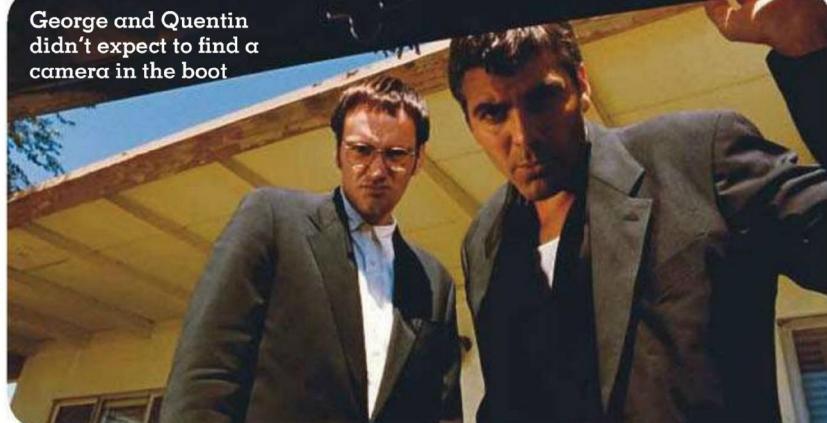
→ From Dusk Till Dawn: The Trilogy

This triple-pack serves up Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino's fun-packed, gore-splashed vampire flick (blighted only by the latter's appalling acting) and its two made-for-DVD spawn. The dreadful *Texas Blood Money* sees a gang of bank robbers become vampires, while the Western-themed *The Hangman's Daughter* acts as a slightly less awful prequel to the series. **Picture:** *From Dusk Till Dawn* takes a bite out of Blu-ray with a richly coloured AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode that captures the film's hot, sweaty atmosphere perfectly, without the obvious artefacting that caused issues on the old DVD release. While some points are lost for excessive black crush and minor sharpening, on the whole it's a very positive hi-def experience.

The same cannot be said of either sequel.

Texas Blood Money fares the worst with an unrefined AVC 1.85:1 1080p transfer that suffers from muddy detailing and faded blacks that give the image a flat look. Meanwhile, *The Hangman's Daughter*'s AVC 1.85:1 1080p visuals seem to vary from shot to shot. Sometimes it's crystal clear, other times it's no better than its predecessor.

Audio: All three films in the set make their Blu-ray debut accompanied by a DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack. As expected given its cinematic origins, the first provides the most robust and detailed soundfield. The track makes frequent use of the whole 360-degree soundscape to bring the interior of the Titty Twister bar to life, while dialogue and Foley effects are precisely rendered and full-bodied.



George and Quentin didn't expect to find a camera in the boot

If the two made-for-DVD sequels are somewhat less expansive, at least both have a handful of effective showcase moments that remind you that the rear speakers are still working. They sound a bit better than they look.

Extras: The original film gets the benefit of a commentary track by Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino; outtakes; a 13-min *Making of...* featurette; the trailer; two music videos; a stills gallery; a quartet of short scene-specific behind-the-scenes vignettes; deleted scenes; and on-set footage. The most glaring omission is *Full Tilt Boogie*, an excellent feature-length *Making of...* documentary that has previously appeared on the DVD release and broadcast on Channel 4.

Fittingly, the amount of extras offered by the sequels match the quality of the movies themselves. *Texas Blood Money* serves up no extras whatsoever, while *The Hangman's Daughter* gets a solitary deleted scene. Whoop-dee-do.

HCC VERDICT

From Dusk Till Dawn: The Trilogy → Lionsgate Region B BD → £45 Approx

We say: Ignore this boxset and pick up the first film on its own

Picture:

Sound:

Extras:

Movie:

Overall:



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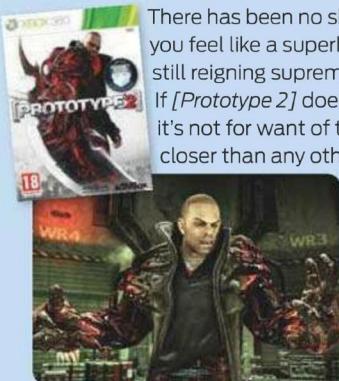
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Arcade action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

[Prototype 2]

Activision → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £50 Approx



There has been no shortage of games that try to make you feel like a superhero, with *Batman: Arkham City* still reigning supreme as the benchmark for the genre. If *[Prototype 2]* doesn't quite measure up to that title, it's not for want of trying, and in the process it comes closer than any other game.

This third-person action-adventure is set in an open world recreation of New York, overrun by sinister military types and hordes of mutants. As you progress through missions your abilities are boosted – with each skill upgrade bringing further

superpowers, such as Wolverine-esque claws or rock-hands like the Fantastic Four's Thing. In doing so it gives players a sense of empowerment like no other game around, and before long you'll be swan-diving off a skyscraper, landing on a helicopter and bringing it down with the missile launcher you rip away from its undercarriage. All of which goes a long way to making up for the repetitive nature of the missions and ham-fisted storytelling.

This high-octane action explodes onto the screen in a riot of razor-sharp visuals and pounding audio that brings the best out of the current generation of games consoles. Add that to the superb gameplay and, even if *[Prototype 2]* isn't quite perfect, it's still an absorbing game that I know I'll be returning to again.



Max Payne 3

Rockstar Games → Xbox 360/PS3 → £50 Approx



The first couple of *Max Payne* games played like the hard-boiled crime fiction of Frank Miller's *Sin City* comics filtered through the action of vintage John Woo movies. With the franchise now coming under the control of *Grand Theft Auto* creators Rockstar Games, this belated third entry looks to shake things up in

terms of aesthetics. As evidenced by the mis-registered imagery, random subtitles and sickly green and yellow palette, this is *Max Payne* as envisioned by somebody who has spent too much time watching Tony Scott's *Man on Fire* and *Domino* [that's me – Ed].

Not that I'm complaining. This aesthetic decision fits perfectly with Rockstar's ongoing attempt to combine the worlds of gaming and movies. Coupled with the studio's typically hard-hitting Dolby Digital soundtrack and knack for crafting top-notch set-piece action scenes, the stylish visuals also help to disguise the rather simplistic nature of the gameplay. Okay, you spend a lot of time diving through the air in slow-motion, but at the end of the day it's essentially the same shooting gallery it's always been.



A little more originality can be found in the generous set of multiplayer options. And there's also the promise that 'Crews' created here can be carried over to the forthcoming *GTA V*.



Island of Lost Souls: Dual Format Ed.

Eureka Entertainment → Region B BD/R2 DVD → £23 Approx



Originally banned outright by UK censors, this first screen adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* has stood the test of time extremely well. Unlike other horrors from the same era, the film still maintains an unshakable aura of terror and taboo-busting. With the original negative lost decades ago, this surprisingly

robust AVC 1.37:1 1080p presentation is based upon a hybrid of the best surviving elements from a 35mm fine grain master positive, 35mm nitrate positive and 16mm screening print. Limited but fascinating extras include two interviews and a booklet.



The House by the Cemetery

Arrow Video → All-region BD/RO DVD → £25 Approx



Cult label Arrow Video has pulled out all the stops with this three-disc edition of Lucio Fulci's legendary shocker. The Blu-ray disc includes a restored AVC 2.40:1 1080p presentation of the film (which suffers a little from the digitised look familiar to Arrow releases) accompanied by LPCM 2.0 Italian and English tracks,

two commentaries and a series of interviews (including a general piece celebrating the 'Ladies of Italian Horror'). This content is replicated in SD on an accompanying DVD platter. A second DVD offers a Q&A, deleted scene and various vintage trailers.



Castle Freak

88 Films → RO DVD → £15 Approx



Newcomer 88 Films continues to unearth the gems in the Full Moon Pictures library with this latest release. Reuniting director Stuart Gordon with his *Re-Animator* stars Jeffrey Combes and Barbara Crampton, *Castle Freak* draws upon another Lovecraft story (*The Outsider*), only this time filtered through references to the Italian Giallo.

While the source print is riddled with dirt, it's still a pleasure to finally see the film released in its original 1.85:1 aspect ratio. It's also a treat to see the label continue to source archive extras for its discs – such as the short *Making of...* included here.



Teen Wolf: Season One

MGM → R1/2/4 DVD → £25 Approx



Obviously created to cash-in on the *Twilight*-inspired trend for supernatural romance, this MTV-produced show should be awful. And for its first few episodes it teeters on the brink of failure. But then something unexpected happens – as the central mystery hits high-gear it starts to really embrace its horror roots and

becomes downright enjoyable. This three-disc set features anamorphic 1.78:1 NTSC transfers that hold up well and slightly flat DD5.1 audio. The DVD also delivers an impressive set of bonus features. Now, roll on Season Two...



Richard Hammond's final *Top Gear* stunt saw him go out in a blaze of glory



Get your motor running

Directing duo Neveldine/Taylor crank up the spectacle in this stereoscopic sequel

→ Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance

When it comes to the pantheon of Marvel Comics superheroes, few can boast the same visual impact as Ghost Rider's flaming skull and motorbike. But that's pretty much all he offers – a stylish visual that wouldn't look out of place on the cover of a 1980s heavy metal album.

Yet, regardless of these limitations, Hollywood seems convinced that there's a good film in there somewhere. Realising the inherent craziness of the concept, this time around the studio financing the flicks brought in *Crank* directors Neveldine/Taylor to embrace the madness. And they've certainly achieved that goal.

Spirit of Vengeance is a bonkers piece of action cinema that has a lot of fun with its titular CG character and Nic Cage's trademark loony acting. It's not the sort of movie likely to win an Academy Award, but in the right situation, with the right amount of alcohol, it can be fairly entertaining in a very silly way.

Picture: EntertainmentOne's Blu-ray release can be viewed in either 3D or 2D courtesy of a very agreeable MVC 2.40:1 1080p encode.

The 2D presentation is particularly thrilling, serving up gorgeous sharp imagery and remarkable detail levels. Neveldine/Taylor favour big comic book-style facial close-ups throughout the film and the hi-def transfer



certainly makes the most of exploring every wrinkle, pore and scar on show. Indeed, I'm hard-pushed to say how it could possibly look any better.

The 3D version was converted in post-production, but actually fares surprisingly well. There's tangible depth in the majority of the shots, with sequences such as the final chase in Chapter 11 making full use of the additional dimensionality as Ghost Rider weaves his bike between cars. On the downside, the rapid-cutting and constantly moving camera sometimes makes the 3D hard to process, as seen in some of the faster shots in Chapter 6's quarry attack. Neveldine/Taylor are skilled enough to make a 3D film from scratch. *Crank 3D*, anyone?

Audio: Whether you opt to watch the disc in 3D or 2D, one constant is the quality of the DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack. As you'd expect this is a tooth-rattling, bone-shaking mix of immense power and quality. The surrounds are permanently engaged, there's a precision to every element of the mix, and it succeeds in immersing you in the heart of the on-screen action. Superb.

Extras: This UK release differs significantly from Sony's US platter by ditching the video commentary in favour of 20 minutes of behind-the-scenes vignettes, a 20-min look at the film's vehicles and a 9-min discussion of converting films to 3D in post production (presented in 3D). Shared extras take the form of six deleted scenes and an epic 86-min *Making of...* documentary.



HCC VERDICT

Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance
EntertainmentOne → Region B
BD/R2 DVD → £25 Approx

We say: A fitfully enjoyable action flick makes a very good impression on BD

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

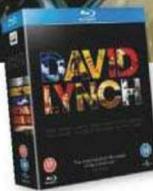
Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

Public displays of affection are the number one cause of traffic jams on the M25



Get ready for a lynching

One Blu-ray box set. Six films by the king of cult cinema. Countless technical issues



HCC VERDICT

David Lynch Boxset
Universal Pictures
Region B BD → £60 Approx

We say: The haphazard quality of this set is more puzzling than the plots of any of Lynch's films

Picture: 1 2 3 4 5

Sound: 1 2 3 4 5

Extras: 1 2 3 4 5

Movie: 1 2 3 4 5

Overall: 1 2 3 4 5

→ David Lynch Boxset

The surrealist movies of filmmaker David Lynch are an acquired taste, but one that I took to decades ago. As such, I was thrilled when this six-disc boxset was announced. After all, what self-respecting fan wouldn't relish the opportunity to savour almost two-thirds of Lynch's cinematic output (*Eraserhead*, *Dune*, *Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart*, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* and *Lost Highway*) on Blu-ray in one fell swoop?

But little could anyone have suspected the almost Lynchian level of bewildering horror that Universal Pictures was about to unleash...

Picture: Despite suspicions of minor contrast boosting and a hint of digital filtering, the highlight is *Eraserhead*'s remarkably crisp and detailed AVC 1.85:1 1080p black-and-white transfer. Slightly less successful are the *Dune* and *Blue Velvet* AVC 2.40:1 1080p encodes. While both clearly improve on earlier UK DVDs, neither quite matches up to their American hi-def counterparts.

Wild at Heart's AVC 2.40:1 imagery is okay, particularly in regards to colour saturation, but is obviously lacking in fine detail.

The biggest mystery however surrounds *Twin Peaks...* and *Lost Highway*, both of which are presented as 1080i/50 encodes. What makes this even more

annoying is that MK2, the company Universal licensed these films from, has already released both titles with 1080p encodes on Blu-ray in France. Sacré bleu!

And, if that wasn't bad enough, there's a glitch on *Lost Highway* that sometimes causes the film to freeze-up around the 80-minute mark.

Audio: The winners here are *Eraserhead*'s ominous LPCM 2.0 track, plus *Dune* and *Blue Velvet*'s more expansive DTS-HD MA 5.1 offerings.

However, *Wild at Heart*, *Lost Highway* and *Twin Peaks...* are all saddled with LPCM 2.0 soundtracks, despite the fact that they have been issued previously on Blu-ray with DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes (one of which was Universal Pictures' earlier UK standalone release of *Wild at Heart*).

Twin Peaks... also suffers from sporadic pitch issues, like that of an audio tape suddenly speeding up and slowing down.

Extras: Spread around this set you'll find some worthwhile extras, including Lynch's *Dumbland* cartoons, the feature-length *Lynch One doc* (about the making of *Inland Empire*) and numerous short films. But apart from *Dune* and *Blue Velvet* there are none that directly relate to the movies they accompany, despite the fact that such material has appeared on other DVD and BD releases. Disappointing.

The Fox and the Hound

Walt Disney → All-region BD
£20 Approx



Few people class this feature as one of Disney's animated classics. Typical of the studio's output in the '80s, *The Fox and the Hound* feels both old-fashioned and unimaginative. But is that really an excuse for not putting much effort into its Blu-ray release?

Disney collectors are unlikely to be wowed by this Blu-ray's AVC 1.66:1 1080p encode, taken from a rather worn-looking source print desperately in need of restoration. Likewise, the sole extra (a short featurette about unlikely animal friends) won't appeal to anyone over the age of five.



Tarzan

Walt Disney → All-region BD
£20 Approx



This Blu-ray debut for Disney's take on Edgar Rice Burroughs' ape-man is every bit as frustrating as that for *The Fox and the Hound*. Visually it fares much better, with a beautifully presented AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode, but this disc can't even muster a lossless soundtrack, only offering a Dolby Digital 5.1 mix – a cardinal sin for a modern movie. Add to that the basic menus and limited extras (a deleted scene, Phil Collins' music video and *Disney Pedia* featurette) and it's hard to shake the feeling that this disc has been sitting in the Disney vaults waiting for release for a number of years.



Pocahontas

Walt Disney → All-region BD
£25 Approx



It may have had a pretty tough time with critics on its original release, but this animated take on the story of Pocahontas has stood the test of time slightly better than contemporary stablemates like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Tarzan*. It's also the best of the trio of new Disney Blu-ray releases by a considerable distance. The AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode looks magnificent and is perfectly matched by a sweeping DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack. Plentiful extras include a *Making of...* doc, extensive behind-the-scenes featurettes, music videos, animation tests and much more.



A Monster in Paris 3D

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Taking its cues from *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, it's safe to say that this isn't your typical animated kids' film. And yet *A Monster in Paris* ultimately has little to offer older viewers outside of some attractive production design.

The superb visuals are rendered perfectly by the MVC 3D 1.85:1 1080p encode, even if the stereoscopic effects themselves are rather hit-or-miss (the film can also be viewed in 2D). Much more involving is the film's expansive DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack.



It's time to play the music...

It's time to light the lights. It's time to raise the curtain on a new HD delight!



→ The Muppets

It's been over a decade since Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy, Fozzy Bear, Gonzo the Great and the rest of Jim Henson's madcap puppets last appeared on the silver screen in the disappointing *Muppets from Space*. With their career in the doldrums, it looked like the franchise was done for and could only be saved by something truly amazing. Enter *The Muppets*, a heartfelt and extremely funny attempt to reintroduce the gang to kids of all ages. And you know what? It works. Welcome back!

Picture: Watching *The Muppets* on Blu-ray is akin to having somebody shoot rainbows directly into your eyes. The AVC 1.78:1 1080p image immediately dazzles with its extraordinarily bold colour saturation, before setting out to wow you even more with incredible detailing, picking out every textured fabric used to create the film's fuzzy cast. Add to that the complete lack of any offensive digital anomalies and you have a flawless hi-def encode.

Audio: Music has always played a key role in the history of the Muppets, and it remains a major part of the success of this Blu-ray's all-singing, all-dancing DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack. The tonality and range of the mix during the musical numbers (including the Oscar-winning *Man or Muppet*) is simply sublime, but even away from these moments it proves to be a rich and dynamic affair, with plenty of work for your subwoofer and surround speakers.

Extras: Disney's movie comes to Blu-ray with a reasonable assortment of bonus features – although anybody expecting an in-depth analysis of the enduring popularity of the



HCC VERDICT

The Muppets → Walt Disney
All-region BD → £25 Approx

We say: The most sensational, inspirational, celebrational, muppetational disc around!

Picture: 

Sound: 

Extras: 

Movie: 

Overall: 



Muppets, or the making of the film, are barking up the wrong tree.

Co-writer/actor Jason Segel, co-writer/producer Nicholas Stoller and director James Bobin kick things off with a slightly spotty commentary track that spends as much time doling out non sequiturs as it does details about the film's production. Much more enjoyable is *Scratching the Surface*, a tongue-in-cheek *Making of...* featurette that manages to tell you more about the movie-making process in its 16-minute running time than the commentary manages in more than six times that length.

Also included are a nine-minute blooper reel, a spoof video following Kermit and the gang on the way to a script read-through, eight deleted scenes, the full-length version of Tex Richman's song and (best of all) seven very funny spoof trailers made to promote the film – including two that, for some reason, were never released.

Demo screen

Ignoring **Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows** on Blu-ray would be a crime...



Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows

Warner Home Video → All-region BD → £25 Approx

Time code: 088.37 – 091.58



'I do quite like action sequences,' states director Guy Ritchie, 'but I'm only interested in doing action sequences if I can somehow add something new to it.' Well, if that's all he's worried about, then Ritchie should be able to rest easy, safe in the knowledge that this standout sequence from the recent *Sherlock Holmes* sequel truly ups the ante in delivering an AV spectacle unlike anything you've ever seen before.

The setup is simplicity itself. Holmes, Watson and the Gypsy fortune-teller Simza escape from Moriarty's munitions factory

through a nearby forest. As they are pursued by soldiers and surrounded by artillery fire, the action repeatedly drops into slow-motion, creating an astonishing visual tableau from the AVC 2.40:11080p Blu-ray encode, accompanied by wildly creative and impactful DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics.

Slo-mo sensation

Ritchie's first *Sherlock Holmes* introduced audiences to '*Holmes-o-vision*' – a slo-mo visualisation of the detective playing out fights in his head before they happen. This sequence expands on that aesthetic, taking it out of Holmes' head and allowing it to exist simply because it looks so cool.

'I can tell that [Ritchie] is really, really giddy and happy about some of the tech stuff he was able to do,' explains leading man Robert Downey Jr. And what else would you expect from a director who is being allowed to experiment and push the high-speed Phantom camera to its limit?

'Most of the feedback I've gotten is people saying that they think this was the most innovative action in the movie,' adds Downey Jr. We also think it happens to be an astonishing AV demo sequence that showcases the best of Blu-ray's hi-def video and lossless audio. And you don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to work that one out for yourself.

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TV screens



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Size (inches)	3D type	Panel type	HDMI	Component	PC	Networking	Internet TV	Wi-fi ready	Freeview HD	Freesat HD	Issue	Rating	Comment
LG	50PZ950T	£1,600	50	A	PDP	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	196	12345	Excellent all rounder, minor judder
LG	55LW980T	£2,500	55	P	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	202	12345	Rear LED, passive TV is superb
LG	47LM670	£1,500	47	P	LED	3	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	209	12345	Shadow detailing could be better
LG	55LM660T	£2,100	55	P	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	208	12345	Passive 3D impresses at this size
Loewe	Individual Compose 3D	£5,000	46	A	LED	3	1	1	+	+	-	+	+	202	12345	Debut 3D screen offers motorised control and built-in HDD
Panasonic	TX-P55VT30	£2,700	55	A	PDP	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	197	12345	Sublime plasma is best-in-class
Panasonic	TX-L42E3B	£600	42	-	LED	3	1	1	-	-	-	+	-	200	12345	No frills 42in LED seems expensive
Panasonic	TX-P50GT30	£1,800	50	A	PDP	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	195	12345	Stunning 2D and 3D mid-ranger
Panasonic	TX-P42ST30	£1,200	42	A	PDP	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	198	12345	Entry-level 3D plasma
Panasonic	TX-P50ST50	£1,400	50	A	PDP	3	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	208	12345	Mid-range PDP, smooth motion
Panasonic	TX-L47DT50	£2,000	47	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	209	12345	Pricey, but an excellent performer
Philips	42PFL7666	£900	42	P	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	207	12345	Affordable Passive Ambilight
Philips	50PFL7956	£2,000	50	P	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	205	12345	21:9 ratio TV for the masses
Philips	46PFL9706	£2,300	46	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	204	12345	Moth Eye tech reaps benefits
Samsung	UE40D6530	£1,100	40	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	198	12345	Brilliant pictures and Smart skills
Samsung	UE40D7000	£1,400	40	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	197	12345	Gorgeous TV, superb performance
Samsung	UE60D8000	£4,300	60	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	200	12345	Big screen comes with a big price
Samsung	UE40D5520	£600	40	-	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	200	12345	Superb budget set is hard to fault
Samsung	PS64D8000	£2,400	64	A	PDP	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	204	12345	Giant plasma at a good price
Samsung	PS51D6900	£1,000	51	A	PDP	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	198	12345	Aggressively priced 3D bigscreen
Samsung	UE55ES8000	£2,500	55	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	206	12345	Seductive design, full of features
Samsung	UE46ES7000	£1,700	46	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	+	209	12345	Saves cash on the ES8000 model
Sharp	LC-46LE831E	£1,300	46	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	199	12345	Sharp's best LED screen ever
Sharp	LC-60LE636E	£2,600	60	-	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	208	12345	Get it for as little as £1,200 online
Sony	KDL-40CX523	£550	40	-	CCFL	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	200	12345	CCFL screen packs tons of features
Sony	KDL-40HX723	£1,300	40	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	201	12345	Excellent bigscreen all-round
Sony	KDL-40EX524	£800	40	-	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	197	12345	Great features, decent 2D-only pics
Sony	KDL-55HX853	£1,800	55	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	209	12345	Class-leading motion handling
Toshiba	42RL853	£600	42	-	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	199	12345	Affordable 42incher with few frills
Toshiba	47VL863	£900	47	P	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	201	12345	Suffers from limited contrast
Toshiba	32UL863	£500	32	-	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	204	12345	Feature-rich 32incher impresses
Toshiba	40RL858	£500	40	-	LED	3	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	206	12345	No 3D, but a good all-round effort
Toshiba	55WL863	£1,800	55	A	LED	4	1	1	+	+	+	+	-	203	12345	CEVO-powered TV is first-rate

A = Active. P = Passive

TV SCREENS EXPLAINED...

PLASMA VS LCD. PLUS, 3D'S RIVAL SYSTEMS

The TV market is becoming increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play. These generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D cross-talk, but less brightness.

Most 3D screens feature the Active system that uses expensive powered 3D specs to deliver full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of 3D is halved to 540 lines.

Editor's Choice...

SONY

55in → KDL-55HX853
→ £1,800 Approx

Sony has returned to form with this 55in LED 3DTV that majors on detail and motion handling, and sports a price that undercuts similar-sized rivals. Buy with confidence.

Tested: Issue 209
For more info visit: www.sony.co.uk



Blu-ray players



Manufacturer	Model	Price	BD Live storage	3D	Multi-channel analogue out	HDMI	USB	Online portal	Wi-fi ready	DVD-Audio/SACD	Issue	Rating	Comment
Arcam	FMJ-BDP100	£1,000	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Rock-solid build quality and pics to match
Cambridge Audio	Azur 751BD	£800	●	●	●	2	●	●	●	●/●	199	1 2 3 4 5	Universal deck performs well, needs more 'net
Denon	DBP-1611UD	£400	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Awful GUI but 3D pics are as good as it gets
Denon	DBP-2012UD	£750	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	198	1 2 3 4 5	High-performance player with battleship build
Dune	Smart B1	£240	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	198	1 2 3 4 5	Advanced networking features will wow techies
LG	BX580	£150	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	189	1 2 3 4 5	Reasonable BD pics, messy DVD upscaler
LG	BD670	£170	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	199	1 2 3 4 5	Smart BD player offers great value
Marantz	UD7006	£800	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	200	1 2 3 4 5	Superior AV performance and tasty design
NAD	M56	£1,900	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	183	1 2 3 4 5	Motion processing issues spoil the day
Onkyo	BD-SP808	£500	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	195	1 2 3 4 5	Accomplished disc spinner. Slow disc loader
Onkyo	BD-SP809	£500	●	●	●	2	●	●	●	●/●	203	1 2 3 4 5	Performs well, but lacks features for this price
Oppo	BDP-95EU	£900	●	●	●	2	●	●	●	●/●	197	1 2 3 4 5	Even better build and results than the BDP-93EU
Oppo	BDP-93EU	£500	●	●	●	2	●	●	●	●/●	195	1 2 3 4 5	Awesomely good video and music performance
Oppo	BDP-83SE	£1,300	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	190	1 2 3 4 5	Precision engineered analogue audio output
Panasonic	DMP-BD75	£110	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	196	1 2 3 4 5	OK images, quick loader, underwhelming to use
Panasonic	DMP-BDT310	£260	●	●	●	2	●	●	●	●/●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Terrific new GUI, refined sound and pictures
Panasonic	DMP-BDT300	£260	●	●	●	2	●	●	●	●/●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Versatile, aging deck. Look out for discounts
Panasonic	DMP-BDT500	£300	●	●	●	2	●	●	●	●/●	208	1 2 3 4 5	Sonically superior, awkward touchpad remote
Panasonic	DMP-BDT320	£230	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	209	1 2 3 4 5	No twin HDMI or analogue out; good performer
Panasonic	BFT800EBK	£650	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	192	1 2 3 4 5	Built-in soundbar and iPod dock. Great 3D pics
Philips	BDP7600	£200	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	198	1 2 3 4 5	Feature-heavy deck with open web browser
Philips	BDP7500 MKII	£200	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Slickly designed with decent 2D and 3D images
Primare	BD32	£3,500	●	●	●	2	●	●	●	●/●	206	1 2 3 4 5	Ultimate high-end universal player
Samsung	BD-D7500	£250	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	198	1 2 3 4 5	Style-centric wall-mountable 3D player
Samsung	BD-D6900	£300	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	195	1 2 3 4 5	Decent BD deck with built-in Freeview HD tuner
Samsung	BD-C6900	£255	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Quick loader, versatile deck. Passable pictures
Samsung	BD-E8500	£400	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	207	1 2 3 4 5	Smart PVR with 3D Blu-ray playback
Sharp	BD-HP90S	£290	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Slot-loading vertical design, expensive
Sony	BDP-S380	£130	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	199	1 2 3 4 5	Budget player misses out on 3D and networking
Sony	BDP-S480	£150	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	198	1 2 3 4 5	Brilliant deck offers superior VOD at a low price
Sony	BDP-SX1	£300	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	202	1 2 3 4 5	Portable, WSVGA resolution, but outputs Full HD
Sony	BDP-S185	£90	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	204	1 2 3 4 5	Solid budget way to get IPTV and Blu-ray
Toshiba	BDX3100	£185	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Feature-light but does the job with solid pics
Toshiba	BDX3200	£150	●	●	●	1	●	●	●	●/●	197	1 2 3 4 5	Unexciting player can't compete with rivals
Yamaha	BD-A1010	£500	●	●	●	2	●	●	●	●/●	203	1 2 3 4 5	Universal deck with a few flaws

BLU-RAY EXPLAINED...

MATCHING YOUR DECK TO YOUR AMP

Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a deck, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your amplifier. If it's an older model that doesn't have HDMI inputs then you'll need a BD player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy hi-res surround sound formats. Most current AVRs have HDMI inputs that accept bitstreamed Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD MA, but not all receivers can cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one for the amp, one for the TV.

Editor's Choice...

SAMSUNG

BD-E8500 → £400 Approx

£400 may seem a lot for a 3D Blu-ray player, but Samsung's sleek-looking BD-E8500 doubles as a twin-tuner Freeview HD PVR, with 500GB of recording space. The raft of Smart features onboard includes VOD access, CD ripping and media streaming. Outside of the PS3, it's hard to find a product with such flexibility.

Tested: Issue 207

For more info visit: www.samsung.co.uk

AV Receivers



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Claimed power	THX	Multi-ch in	HDMI in	HDMI out	3D	Dolby True HD	DTS HD MA	Networking	Net tuner	Issue	Rating	Comment
Anthem	MRX 700	£2,100	7 x 120W	●	●	4	1	●	●	●	●	●	195	1 2 3 4 5	Complex set-up, great EQ sound
Arcam	AVR400	£1,700	7 x 90W	●	●	5	1	●	●	●	●	●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Beautifully built. Ace analogue audio
Denon	AVR-4311	£2,000	9 x 170W	●	●	6	2	●	●	●	●	●	193	1 2 3 4 5	Polished audio, Airplay streaming
Denon	AVR-1912	£450	7 x 90W	●	●	6	1	●	●	●	●	●	204	1 2 3 4 5	Lacks gusto and video scaling
Denon	AVR-2311	£800	7 x 135W	●	●	6	1	●	●	●	●	●	190	1 2 3 4 5	iPod dock but no networking
Denon	AVR-3312	£1,000	7 x 165W	●	●	7	2	●	●	●	●	●	202	1 2 3 4 5	New GUI, AirPlay as standard
Marantz	NR1602	£550	7 x 50W	●	●	4	1	●	●	●	●	●	201	1 2 3 4 5	Slimline AVR is forward-thinking
NAD	T 757	£1,500	7 x 60W	●	●	4	1	●	●	●	●	●	201	1 2 3 4 5	Limited features, but superb sound
Onkyo	TX-NR609	£500	7 x 60W	●	●	6	1	●	●	●	●	●	195	1 2 3 4 5	Comprehensive, stunning performer
Onkyo	TX-NR5009	£2,700	9 x 220W	●	●	8	2	●	●	●	●	●	203	1 2 3 4 5	Full-blooded 9-channel powerhouse
Onkyo	TX-SR308	£250	5 x 100W	●	●	3	1	●	●	●	●	●	191	1 2 3 4 5	Under specified and under powered
Onkyo	TX-NR1009	£1,300	9 x 180W	●	●	8	2	●	●	●	●	●	205	1 2 3 4 5	Smooth sound; THX Select2
Pioneer	VSX-520	£300	5 x 130W	●	●	3	1	●	●	●	●	●	191	1 2 3 4 5	Decent sound; spring-clip terminals
Pioneer	SC-LX83	£2,000	7 x 190W	●	●	3	1	●	●	●	●	●	186	1 2 3 4 5	Punchy audio with superb control
Pioneer	SC-LX85	£2,000	9 x 190W	●	●	7	2	●	●	●	●	●	205	1 2 3 4 5	Heady mix of power and features
Pioneer	VSX-922	£500	7 x 150W	●	●	6	1	●	●	●	●	●	209	1 2 3 4 5	Packed with features, clinical sound
Pioneer	VSX-2021	£800	7 x 150W	●	●	7	2	●	●	●	●	●	200	1 2 3 4 5	Class-leading control and RoomEQ
T+A	K8	£6,000	7 x 150W	●	●	3	1	●	●	●	●	●	205	1 2 3 4 5	High-end AVR with built-in BD deck
Yamaha	RXV-3067	£1,500	7 x 140W	●	●	8	2	●	●	●	●	●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Superb and musical reproduction
Yamaha	RXV-471	£300	5 x 105W	●	●	4	1	●	●	●	●	●	199	1 2 3 4 5	Brilliant sounding entry-level AVR
Yamaha	RX-A3010	£2,000	7 x 230W	●	●	8	2	●	●	●	●	●	207	1 2 3 4 5	The true successor to the Z11
Yamaha	RXV-1067	£850	7 x 105W	●	●	8	2	●	●	●	●	●	190	1 2 3 4 5	Optimised for cinema. Good connects

NEW ENTRY

Systems



Manufacturer	Model	Price	3D	Claimed power	Configuration	Dolby True HD	DTS HD MA	HDMI in/out	Component	Online portal	Wi-fi ready	Issue	Rating	Comment
Harman/Kardon	BDS800	£1,100	●	525W	5.1	●	●	0/1	●	●	●	194	1 2 3 4 5	Nil by 1080p24. OK performance
Harman/Kardon	BDS470	£650	●	330W	2.1	●	●	3/1	●	●	●	206	1 2 3 4 5	Performance-first 2.1 option. 5.1 available
LG	BH8220B	£650	●	1,000W	5.1	●	●	2/1	●	●	●	209	1 2 3 4 5	Largescale sound but lacks HF finesse
Panasonic	SC-BTT775	£400	●	1,000W	5.1	●	●	2/1	●	●	●	198	1 2 3 4 5	A decent starter system for AV novices
Panasonic	SC-BTT330	£350	●	1,000W	5.1	●	●	2/1	●	●	●	200	1 2 3 4 5	Affordable surround sound, old net portal
Panasonic	SC-BTT590	£630	●	1,000W	5.1	●	●	2/1	●	●	●	209	1 2 3 4 5	New driver tech improves Panny's sound
Samsung	HT-D6750W	£800	●	1,300W	5.1	●	●	2/1	●	●	●	197	1 2 3 4 5	Claims to be 7.1 but isn't
Samsung	HT-C9950W	£2,000	●	1,000W	7.1	●	●	2/1	●	●	●	190	1 2 3 4 5	Perfect style match for Samsung's TVs
Samsung	HT-E6750W	£1,000	●	1,330W	5.1	●	●	2/1	●	●	●	208	1 2 3 4 5	Valve tech adds some warmth to sonics
Sony	BDV-E370	£500	●	850W	5.1	●	●	0/1	●	●	●	187	1 2 3 4 5	Good sound at low volume; SACD playback
Sony	BDV-E880	£400	●	1,000W	5.1	●	●	2/1	●	●	●	201	1 2 3 4 5	Full of features but average audio



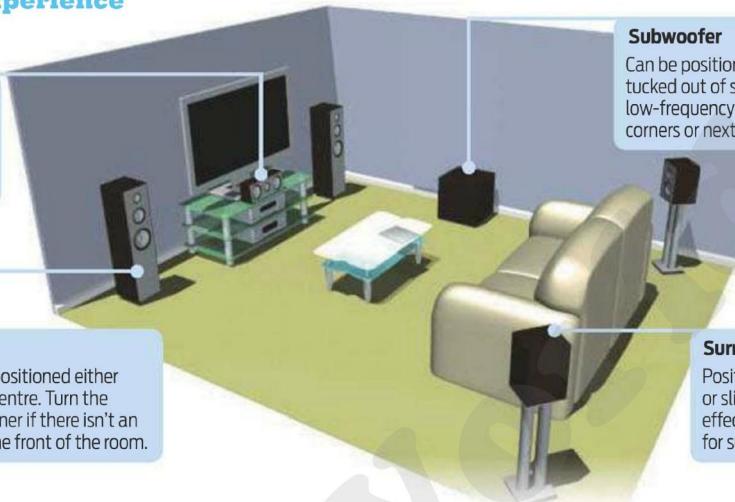
Speakers

Manufacturer	Model	Price	Configuration	Front max power	Rear max power	Centre max power	Sub power	bookshelf	Issue	Rating	Comment
Acoustic Energy	Aegis Neo Max	£1,900	7.1	2 x 200W	2 x 170W	120W	200W	surr	199	1 2 3 4 5	With 2 x 120W surrounds. An awful lot of speakers for the money
Acoustic Energy	Compact/Neo	£850	6.1	2 x 100W	2 x 100W	100W	200W	all	201	1 2 3 4 5	6.1 system offers solid sonics
Artcoustic	Spitfire	£21,500	7.5	2 x 250W	2 x 250W	250W	250W	no	200	1 2 3 4 5	Plus 2 x 150W surrounds. Wall-mountable speakers with might
Boston Acoustics	A Series	£2,200	5.2	2 x 200W	2 x 200W	175W	250W	no	205	1 2 3 4 5	Value for money; detail, scale
Bowers & Wilkins	800 Diamond	£22,500	5.1	2 x 500W	2 x 120W	300W	1,000W	no	196	1 2 3 4 5	Breathtaking sound, bonkers price
Cambridge Audio	Minx S325	£800	5.1	2 x 75W	2 x 75W	75W	300W	all	195	1 2 3 4 5	Extraordinary power for dinky size
Canton	Chrono CL	£3,600	5.1	2 x 200W	2 x 100W	140W	250W	rear	204	1 2 3 4 5	Looks and sounds great
Definitive Technology	Mythos XTR-50	£2,400	3.0	2 x 100W	n/a	100W	n/a	no	202	1 2 3 4 5	Wall-mountable flatpanel speakers are a classy solution
Focal	Viva Utopia III	£61,000	5.2	2 x 600W	2 x 600W	600W	Passive	no	207	1 2 3 4 5	Reference grade. Huge cabinets
Image Audio	IA 8/5/C	£4,000	5.0	2 x 150W	2 x 150W	300W	n/a	no	195	1 2 3 4 5	Excellent flat panel speakers
Jamo	A 101 HCS 5	£250	5.1	2 x 70W	2 x 70W	70W	200W	all	205	1 2 3 4 5	Budget package does the business
Jamo	S426 HCS3	£560	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 60W	90W	260W	rear	201	1 2 3 4 5	Affordable floorstanding array
KEF	KHT-1505	£500	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 100W	100W	200W	all	205	1 2 3 4 5	Compact system with agile sub
KEF	Q Series	£2,400	5.1	2 x 130W	2 x 120W	150W	200W	rear	203	1 2 3 4 5	Trickle-down tech reaps rewards
MartinLogan	EM-ESL	£5,300	5.1	2 x 300W	2 x 200W	150W	300W	no	208	1 2 3 4 5	Detailed, seamless sound. Ace
Monitor Audio	Gold GX	£7,150	5.1	2 x 200W	2 x 100W	200W	650W	no	202	1 2 3 4 5	Gorgeous build and sonics
Paradigm	MilleniaOne	£2,500	5.1	2 x 50W	2 x 50W	50W	300W	all	201	1 2 3 4 5	Premium-priced sub/sat package
Paradigm	CT100	£1,150	5.1	2 x 50W	2 x 50W	50W	100W	all	207	1 2 3 4 5	Small cabinets, clean sound
PSB	Image Series	£1,500	5.1	2 x 200W	2 x 150W	150W	150W	rear	199	1 2 3 4 5	Look great, sound tasty
Revel	Concerta	£3,400	5.1	2 x 150W	2 x 125W	150W	250W	no	206	1 2 3 4 5	On-wall system, not cheap
Scandyna	Micropod SE/The Ball	£900	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 100W	100W	60W	all	200	1 2 3 4 5	Quirky design married to hi-tech drivers = slick style system
Tannoy	Definition	£8,200	5.0	2 x 400W	2 x 350W	350W	n/a	rear	197	1 2 3 4 5	Worth every penny. Bring on the sub
Tannoy	Mercury V	£1,100	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 50W	70W	300W	rear	207	1 2 3 4 5	Value-for-money, mature design
Tannoy	HTS-101	£500	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 100W	100W	100W	all	203	1 2 3 4 5	Solid-sounding surround package
Teufel	Theatre 200	£800	5.1	2 x 140W	2 x 150W	140W	250W	all	195	1 2 3 4 5	Bold sats, sub suffers colouration
Q Acoustics	Q7000	£800	5.1	2 x 100W	2 x 100W	100W	250W	all	204	1 2 3 4 5	Class-leading sub/sat package
Wharfedale	DX-1 HCP	£400	5.1	2 x 80W	2 x 80W	100W	150W	all	209	1 2 3 4 5	Tight sub, potent sats, neat design

NEW ENTRY

5.1 CLASSIC HOME CINEMA SPEAKER LAYOUT...

Follow these simple rules when laying out your system and you'll be guaranteed a great listening experience



Centre speaker

Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible.

Front speakers

Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer

Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surround speakers

Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds.

Projectors



Manufacturer	Model	Price (Original)	Type	Resolution	3D	HDMI	Component	12V trigger	Fan noise/dB	Lamp life/hr	Issue	Rating	Comment
BenQ	W1100	£900	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	22	2,500	197	1 2 3 4 5	Dynamic images, noisy fan
BenQ	W1000+	£750	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	26	5,000	193	1 2 3 4 5	Performance transcends price
Casio	XJ-A235	£1,000	DLP	1280 x 800	●	1	0	0	29	20,000	192	1 2 3 4 5	LED/DLP hybrid. Poor pics
Epson	EH-TW3600	£1,300	LCD	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	22	4,000	193	1 2 3 4 5	Bright pics but average black levels
Epson	MG-850HD	£650	LCD	1,280 x 800	●	1	1	0	29	5,000	205	1 2 3 4 5	Offers iPod compatibility
Epson	EH-TW5900	£1,000	LCD	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	0	22	5,000	207	1 2 3 4 5	Great value 3D-ready 1080p PJ
Epson	EH-TW6000	£1,300	LCD	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	0	22	5,000	207	1 2 3 4 5	Better contrast than TW5900
InFocus	SP8600	£800	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	30	2,500	198	1 2 3 4 5	Excellent sub-£1k projector
InFocus	SP8604	£2,500	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	3	1	2	28	3,000	196	1 2 3 4 5	Versatile PJ with decent pictures
InFocus	SP8602	£3,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	3	3	28	2,500	182	1 2 3 4 5	Good pics with minor operating flaws
JVC	DLA-X3	£3,600	D-ILA	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	20	3,000	193	1 2 3 4 5	Aces 2D images, X-talk with 3D
JVC	DLA-X7	£5,550	D-ILA	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	20	3,000	195	1 2 3 4 5	Brightness and black level to die for
JVC	DLA-X70	£7,000	D-ILA	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	20	3,000	207	1 2 3 4 5	e-Shift tech buffs up 2D video
JVC	DLA-HD990	£9,000	D-ILA	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	19	3,000	185	1 2 3 4 5	Gorgeous with amazing black levels
Optoma	HD67N	£500	DLP	1280 x 720	●	1	2	0	29	3,000	194	1 2 3 4 5	With so-so 3D using a 3D-Xl adapter
Optoma	HD20	£900	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	1	2	0	29	4,000	176	1 2 3 4 5	One of the first budget Full HD PJs
Optoma	HD83	£2,400	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	2	22	4,000	203	1 2 3 4 5	3D PJ suffers from limited brightness
Optoma	HD33	£1,350	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	25	4,000	204	1 2 3 4 5	Wallet-friendly model supports 3D
Panasonic	PT-AT5000	£3,200	LCD	1920 x 1080	●	3	1	2	22	4,000	202	1 2 3 4 5	Good connectivity, superb images
Panasonic	PT-AH1000E	£1,600	LCD	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	2	29	3,000	209	1 2 3 4 5	Solid choice for a 2D living room PJ
Runco	LS-HB	£7,500	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	n/a	2,000	205	1 2 3 4 5	Brilliant PJ for bright environments
Runco	LS-5	£7,500	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	2	2	30	4,000	187	1 2 3 4 5	3-chip performance from one chip
Runco	LS-1	£4,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	n/a	4,000	209	1 2 3 4 5	Not 3D, but otherwise v. impressive
Sanyo	PLV-Z4000	£1,800	LCD	1920 x 1080	●	2	2	1	19	3,000	191	1 2 3 4 5	Quiet. Yellow-ish but filmic images
Sharp	XV-Z17000	£4,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	0	n/a	n/a	196	1 2 3 4 5	Living room friendly, 3D impresses
SIM2	MICO 40	£11,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	2	n/a	30,000	189	1 2 3 4 5	Eco-friendly LED-lit and versatile
SIM2	C3X Lumis Uno	£19,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	3	32	2,500	184	1 2 3 4 5	Supreme pics but lacks manual iris
SIM2	Lumis 3D-S	£30,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	3	n/a	3,000	199	1 2 3 4 5	Reference level 3D projector
SIM2	Nero 3D-1	£13,000	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	3	n/a	3,000	206	1 2 3 4 5	Can't afford the Lumis 3D? Get this
Sony	VPL-VW90ES	£5,400	SXRD	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	22	n/a	192	1 2 3 4 5	Great option for a 3D CI build
Sony	VPL-HW20	£2,400	SXRD	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	0	20	n/a	190	1 2 3 4 5	Complex but capable of greatness
Sony	VPL-HW30ES	£3,100	SXRD	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	0	22	n/a	201	1 2 3 4 5	Sony's most affordable 3D offering
Sony	VPL-VW95ES	£5,000	SXRD	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	22	n/a	206	1 2 3 4 5	Excellent 2D image, but 3D has flaws
ViewSonic	Pro8200	£900	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	2	1	1	27	3,000	192	1 2 3 4 5	Falters with motion resolution
ViewSonic	Pro8450	£1,500	DLP	1280 x 1200	●	1	1	1	27	4,000	202	1 2 3 4 5	3D-ready business PJ lacks Full HD
Vivitek	H5080	£2,700	DLP	1920 x 1080	●	3	1	2	27	2,000	186	1 2 3 4 5	Excellent contrast and colour. Noisy

PROJECTOR SCREENS EXPLAINED...

FIXED FRAME OR ROLL AWAY?

When buying a projector, it's important to think about what screen you're going to partner it with. There are two main approaches – fixed-frame, where the screen is placed in a rigid frame and attached permanently to the wall, or 'roll-away' where it can be rolled up when not in use, including via neat, motorised systems. For the best picture quality and dedicated cinema rooms, fixed frame is preferable, as permanent screens generally stay more tautly stretched and deliver the most accurate pictures. Roll-away screens are more suited to when the room needs to double as a living room. Pricing, of course, varies depending on what size you need.

Editor's Choice...

EPSON

LCD → EH-TW5900
→ £1,000 Approx



The first Full HD 3D projector to launch cost around £5,000

– now Epson will sell you one for less than the price of a 50in TV. Yet while the EH-TW5900 is eminently affordable, it punches well above its weight. Both 2D and 3D pics impress, and setup is a doddle.

Tested: Issue 207

For more info visit: www.epson.co.uk

Media Players



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Type	HDD	3D	HDMI	DLNA	Online portal	USB playback	Wi-fi ready	Issue	Rating	Comment
AC Ryan	PlayOn! HD Essential	£130	Player	1TB	●	1	●	●	●	●	194	1 2 3 4 5	No wired Ethernet option, so you have to network via wi-fi dongle
AC Ryan	PlayOn! HD 2	£150	Player	1TB	●	1	●	●	●	●	202	1 2 3 4 5	Well featured and a good performer
Boxee	Boxee Box	£200	VOD	●	●	1	●	●	●	●	193	1 2 3 4 5	iPlayer access. Browser is a pain to use
Buffalo	Linkstation Pro LS-VL	£170	NAS	1TB	●	●	●	●	●	●	192	1 2 3 4 5	Speedy and reliable with Bit Torrent client. 1.5TB and 2TB versions are also available
Crystal Acoustics	PICOHD5.1	£50	Player	●	●	1	●	●	●	●	199	1 2 3 4 5	Small, no frills media player
Crystal Acoustics	Media Matchbox	£55	Player	●	●	1	●	●	●	●	202	1 2 3 4 5	Extensive file support includes lossless audio and BD ISOs. Keenly priced, ultra portable
Digital Stream	DPS-1000	£90	VOD	●	●	1	●	●	●	●	196	1 2 3 4 5	Good for VOD services, no optical out
Eminent	EM7285	£165	Player	●	●	1	●	●	●	●	209	1 2 3 4 5	Wide file support, user-generated App centre
Iomega	StorCenter IX2-200	£215	NAS	2TB	●	0	●	●	●	●	182	1 2 3 4 5	Pocket-sized powerhouse with handy one-touch USB copy
Iomega	Screenplay MX	£140	Player	1TB	●	1	●	●	●	●	194	1 2 3 4 5	No optical audio out or hi-res audio
Iomega	TV with Boxee	£210	NAS	1TB	●	1	●	●	●	●	209	1 2 3 4 5	Boxee interface, decent VOD services
iXtreamer	iXtreamer	£150	NAS	●	●	1	●	●	●	●	199	1 2 3 4 5	Slick player with space for SATA HDD
Netgear	NeoTV 550	£140	Player	●	●	1	●	●	●	●	199	1 2 3 4 5	Solid offering but file support isn't comprehensive
Netgear	ReadyNAS NVX	£500	NAS	1TB	●	0	●	●	●	●	185	1 2 3 4 5	Tank-like NAS can accommodate up to 8TB of storage – a serious bit of hardware
Popbox	Popbox 3D	£140	Player	●	●	1	●	●	●	●	199	1 2 3 4 5	Offers BBC iPlayer and MKV3D file support
Sony	SMP-N100	£120	VOD	●	●	1	●	●	●	●	193	1 2 3 4 5	Bravia Internet TV and streaming aplenty
Synology	USB Station 2	£85	Player	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	193	1 2 3 4 5	Simply add your own USB hard disks
Synology	DS410	£400	Player	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	190	1 2 3 4 5	Accommodates up to 8TB of SATA drives
Teufel	MediaStation 6	£270	Player	1TB	●	1	●	●	●	●	200	1 2 3 4 5	Freeview HD toting player has hideous UI
Toshiba	Stor.E TV+	£170	Player	1TB	●	1	●	●	●	●	195	1 2 3 4 5	Tosh's cute unit supports a wide range of formats
WD	WD TV Live Hub	£200	Player	1TB	●	1	●	●	●	●	190	1 2 3 4 5	Superb multi-format player
WD	WD TV Mini	£48	Player	●	●	0	●	●	●	●	189	1 2 3 4 5	Tiny media player lacks HDMI output

NEW ENTRY

NEW ENTRY

HOME CINEMA Choice

ISSUE
#211 ON SALE
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→ In the next issue

Bigscreen battle Ten flatscreens 50in and above reviewed and rated

Sporting choice We reveal the best sports movies on Blu-ray

Denon delivery First look at 2012 AV receiver lineup

→ On test

LG 55LM960V Flagship Cinema 3D Nano LED TV ONKYO TX-NR616 New-look mid-range AVR EPSON EH-TW9000 Top-of-the-range 3D projector REL T5 Affordable 8in subwoofer KEF R SERIES 5.1 floorstanding array with trickle-down Reference tech PLUS In-depth news, Blu-ray reviews and more



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HOME CINEMA
Choice

If you don't want to miss an issue



Recorders



Manufacturer	Model	Price (£+plus subscription)	Type	HDD/GB	HDMI	Component	Scart	USB Media	Online portal	Wi-fi ready	Issue	Rating	Comment
Panasonic	DMR-PWT500	£400	F'view HD	320	1	0	0	+	+	+	202	1 2 3 4 5	BD/PVR combi needs bigger HDD
Echostar	HDS-600RS	£350	F'sat HD	500	1	0	2	+	+	-	196	1 2 3 4 5	Solid PVR with built-in SlingPlayer feature
Panasonic	DMR-BWT700	£500	F'view HD	320	1	0	1	+	+	+	197	1 2 3 4 5	Complex with Blu-ray recorder and 3D player
Sagemcom	DTR67320T	£150	F'view	320	1	1	2	+	-	-	201	1 2 3 4 5	No HD tuners, but can import/export media
Samsung	BD-E8500	£400	F'view HD	500	1	0	0	+	+	+	207	1 2 3 4 5	'Smart' PVR with 3D BD drive – v. convenient
Samsung	BD-DT7800	£280	F'view HD	500	1	1	0	+	+	+	201	1 2 3 4 5	Can't record two channels at once
Sony	SVR-HDT1000	£350	F'view HD	1TB	1	0	0	+	-	-	204	1 2 3 4 5	Large HDD; iPlayer but no Sony hub
Toshiba	HDR5010	£200	F'view HD	500	3	1	1	+	-	-	201	1 2 3 4 5	Good twin-tuner offering, but no iPlayer yet
TVonics	DTR-Z500HD	£225	F'view HD	500	3	0	1	+	-	-	201	1 2 3 4 5	Firmware has added BBC iPlayer

Subwoofers



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Sealed/ported	Power (RMS)	Frequency response/Hz	Driver size	Dimensions/ (w x h x d)mm	Weight/kg	Issue	Rating	Comment
BK Electronics	XXLS400DF	£410	S	400W	19-120	12in	400 x 460 x 400	28	196	1 2 3 4 5	Clean and tight; great value
Bowers & Wilkins	DB1	£3,250	S	1,000W	17-45	12in x 2	460 x 490 x 410	44	197	1 2 3 4 5	Bipolar arrangement, ripping
Paradigm	SUB1	£5,000	S	1,700W	35-150	8in x 6	505 x 516 x 455	50	197	1 2 3 4 5	Unorthodox hexagonal shape
REL	G1	£3,300	S	600W	15@-6dB	12in	572 x 464 x 660	49	208	1 2 3 4 5	Ultra potent; warm, rich sound
SV Sound	PC 12 Plus DSP	£1,250	P	800W	10-150	12.5in	1,022 x 407	39	198	1 2 3 4 5	Cylindrical sub for big spaces
Tannoy	TS2.12	£550	S	500W	21@-6dB	12in	430 x 440 x 378	18	208	1 2 3 4 5	Extra passive cone adds depth
Velodyne	DD18+	£5,800	S	1,250W	8.8-300	18in	530 x 580 x 650	65	197	1 2 3 4 5	Huge 18in driver, muscular sound
Velodyne	EQ-Max12	£800	P	225W	25-120	12in	416 x 454 x 457	28	204	1 2 3 4 5	EQ system makes placement easy
Velodyne	SPL-800 Ultra	£1,150	S	1,200W	16-240	8in	267 x 280 x 356	33	201	1 2 3 4 5	Compact but potent; nice finish
Wharfedale	SPC-10	£300	S	215W	35-120	10in	352 x 382 x 305	11	202	1 2 3 4 5	Affordable, but lacks grunt

Soundbars



Manufacturer	Model	Price	Power	Separate sub	Sub power	HDMI In	HDMI Out	Dolby True HD	DTS HD MA	Dimensions/ (w x h x d)mm	Weight/kg	Issue	Rating	Comment
Bose	Cinematic 1SR	£1,300	N/A	+	N/A	0	0	-	-	935 x 124 x 61	3.5	208	1 2 3 4 5	Gutsy, but lacks HDMI jacks
LG	HLX-56S	£750	210W	+	150W	2	1	+	+	1000 x 95 x 207	6.8	204	1 2 3 4 5	Stylish and full of features
Orbitsound	T12v3	£300	100W	+	80W	0	0	-	-	605 x 100 x 110	NA	206	1 2 3 4 5	Wide stereo spread, no HDMI
Samsung	HW-E551	£400	160W	+	150W	2	1	+	+	1038 x 55 x 55	1.7	209	1 2 3 4 5	Average audio, clever design
Sharp	HT-SL150	£120	50W	+	50W	1	1	-	-	801 x 26 x 50	NA	207	1 2 3 4 5	World's thinnest 'bar
Yamaha	YSP-2200	£800	132W	+	100W	3	1	+	+	435 x 137 x 350	6	196	1 2 3 4 5	Effective surround sound

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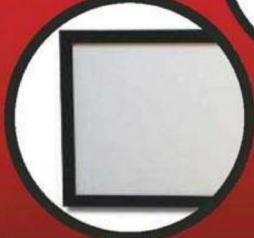
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POINT OF VIEW

Richard Stevenson is worried that modern TV buyers expect good sound quality – and they're not going to get it

It's recently come to light that the buying public don't like 3DTV, don't connect their Smart TVs to the internet and 89 per cent of them are actually stone deaf. Now, a quick straw poll around the *HCC* office would suggest these figures are a little off the mark, but you can't argue with the research. After all, these surveys of consumer behaviour form the basis on which TV manufacturers develop new products and new features for the year ahead. My email inbox is positively awash with survey results at the moment, and one guaranteed conclusion of this research is that 100 per cent of grumpy old AV columnists will get incensed.

Last month there was a Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) of America report that suggested the US public is nonplussed by 3DTV. Less than a quarter of all prospective television buyers said they were looking for a 3D-capable TV, mostly because they didn't want to sit on their sofa sporting comedy Ray-Bans and a migraine. Shocking? Not really.

The CEA also reported that most TV content is still watched on a TV. Yes, **outrageous as it may seem, mobile phones, PCs and tablets are not yet the video display of choice**. I'm glad I didn't pay for those reports.

Back in Blighty, a study by quango pollsters YouGov has shown us that UK television buyers are essentially confused, technophobic and aurally challenged. The report indicated that less than a third of consumers were looking for a Smart TV and, of those purchasing a connected set, less than a quarter will actually get around to hooking it up to the internet. Now, I know it's a pain to remember your Wi-Fi passcode, but that still seems a little lacklustre. Then again, consumers are stupid – ask them which company represents the most stylish and innovative Smart TV brand, and you'll get Apple (which doesn't yet make a TV) as the number one answer. Sigh.

So, why do people buy Smart TVs, if it's not for the Smart functionality? Owners in the YouGov survey say picture quality (96 per cent), screen size (93 per cent) and, bizarrely, sound quality (89 per cent).

Listen up everyone

Eighty-nine per cent? I'm staggered. As every single Smart TV on the market today has appalling sonics I cannot believe that nearly nine out of ten buyers think they sound any good at all. What the hell do these people use as the baseline from which to measure? Long-wave radio? An Edison wax cylinder player? Actually, it's probably those awful, tinny headphones, isn't it?

Audio is just not a priority among the major TV manufacturers these days. They have all, without exception, comprehensively downgraded the sound quality over the last decade to hit lower price points on the High Street. Today's TVs have output wattage in the low single figures, drivers the size of a 1p piece and budget audio processors with all the mathematical power of an abacus.

Worse still, trendy cosmetics dictate that manufacturers craft their sets with virtually no frame around the screen. Fat-bezelled beasts just don't sell. A couple of years ago audio specialist Bose released a TV with an integrated subwoofer and numerous speaker drivers, and a common reaction was, 'Well, it sounds great, but it looks a bit chunky.'

This desire for thinness means the drivers are frequently relegated to the rear panel, facing backwards and often then squished against the wall. The sound lacks intelligibility, and it's no surprise that the single most common phrase spoken between two people whilst watching TV is 'What did they say?' Okay, I might have made that particular statistic up... ●

Do you still use your TV's own speakers, or is your AVR always on? Let us know via letters@homecinemachoice.com

Richard Stevenson's ideal TV features four subwoofers and 2,000W of onboard amplification. Fingers crossed on that one, eh?



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